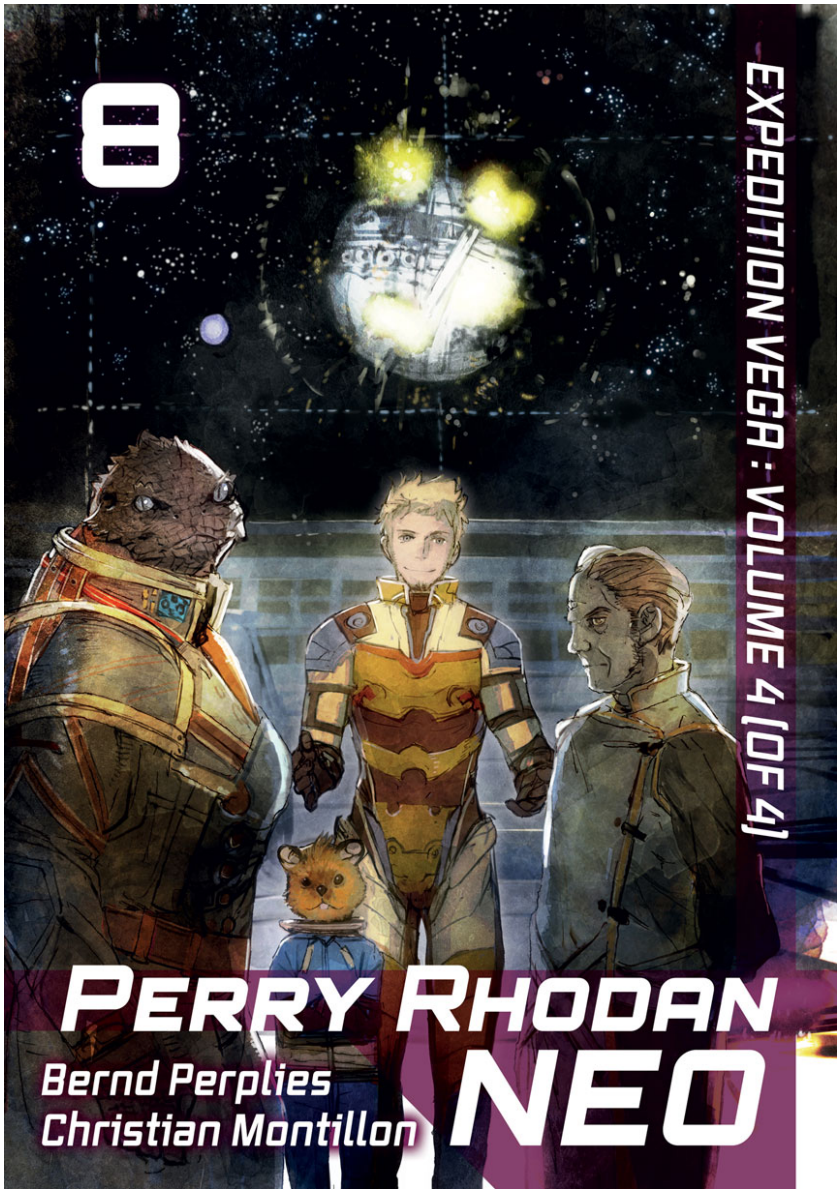
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EXPEDITION VEGA : VOLUME 4 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Bernd Perplies
Christian Montillon

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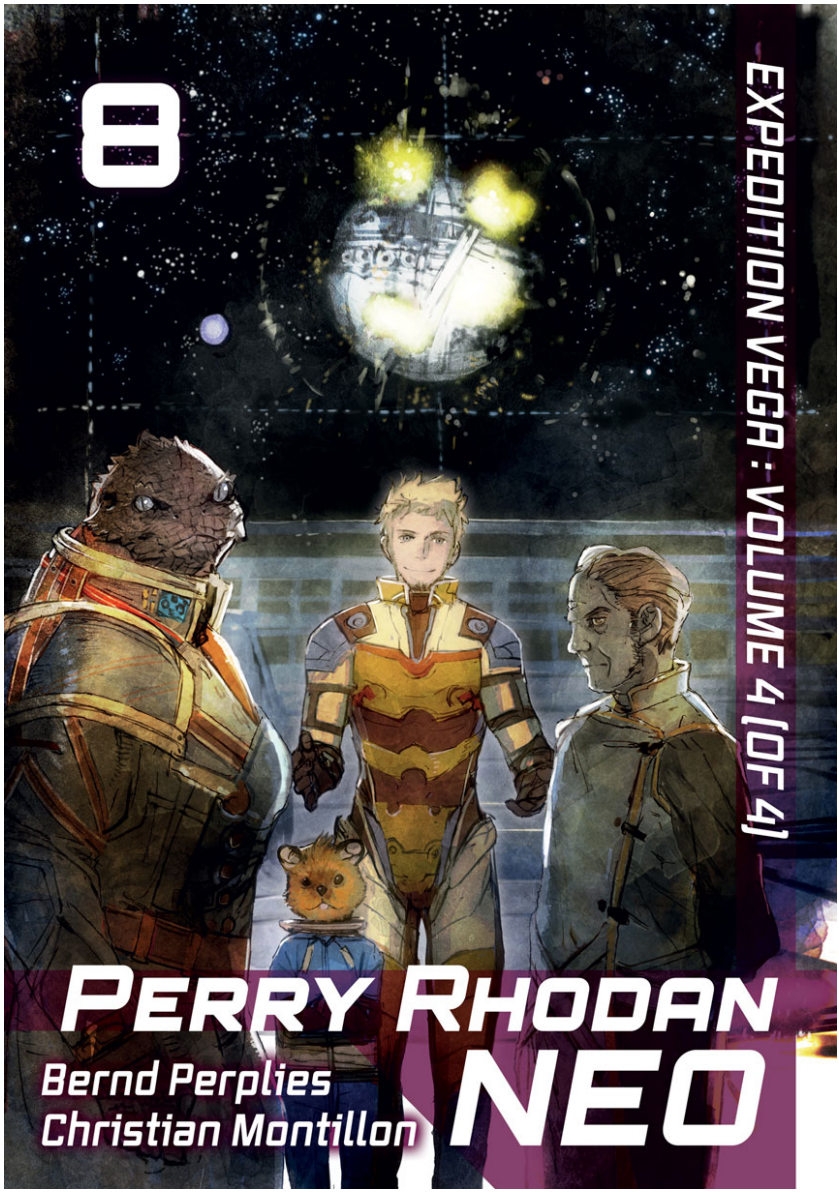
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Episode 15: A Step into the Future

by Bernd Perplies

In August 2036, Perry Rhodan and his companions set out on humanity's first interstellar flight only to end up embroiled in the chaos of war. He and his team reach the solar system with the blue sun Vega, where they find the worlds of the Ferrons being attacked by the lizard-like Topsidans. Rhodan's spaceship is shot down and his group separated.

For Rhodan and those who remain with him, a bitter fight for survival ensues, while the rest of their group is taken prisoner. Rhodan's team uses a transmitter—an ancient technology that allows them to travel across huge distances instantly—to flee across several planets. In this way, the group lands on the mysterious jungle planet Pigell, which holds a terrible secret.

On Earth, the alien Fantan are unstoppable. They steal whatever pleases their eye, while humans are helpless in the face of their extraterrestrial technology. All hope lies in Rhodan's return...

1.

The Jump

San Francisco,

July 30, 2036

The new day was no more than an orange-colored glow on the eastern horizon. The air was refreshingly chilly, and apart from the song of a few early birds, a wonderful silence prevailed.

Ivan Goratschin pushed his feet powerfully against the pedals one last time, taking him to the viewing point on the eastern peak of Mount Tamalpais. Breathing heavily, he pulled the brakes of his mountainbike—an old but very well looked after Canyon Extreme 2.8—and studied the navi-pod attached to the handlebars.

It was just after six. He had managed the route in a good two hours. That wasn't quite the high performance he had achieved in years gone by, but he was no longer a young man.

Goratschin got off his bike, pulled a red water bottle from the back pocket of his windbreaker, and took a large swig. The isotonic energy drink he had filled the bottle with before starting on his mountain tour that morning tasted disgustingly sweet, like melted gummy bears. But it did the job.

The giant Russian took another swallow, rinsed his dry mouth with it, and spat it out again.

Not a young man anymore...

His lips pressed tightly together, he stuffed the bottle back into his back pocket. After that, he took a few steps towards the edge of the viewing point, climbed onto the seat of one of the benches there, and perched himself on the backrest. Then he waited.

The San Francisco Bay Area stretched out before him. A constant stream of headlamps was moving across the bay to his right—early

commuters following the John T. Knox Freeway to cross the narrow Richmond-San Rafael Bridge that connected Richmond on the east bank with San Rafael on the west bank.

The place right next to the freeway, where once the searchlights of San Quentin State Prison had bathed everything in bright light, was now immersed in darkness. Goratschin knew from earlier trips he had taken here that there was nothing left of the infamous jail but ruins. When he asked someone what had happened, they told him that some madman had flown straight into the main building with a sports plane full of explosives about 15 years ago. Apparently, he had wanted to “free the world of the scum” locked up there. The impact left a huge area of debris and a crater with a radius of about a hundred meters. However, the size of the political impact it had left behind was even greater.

While the sky to the east was becoming increasingly light as the new day slowly replaced the night, Goratschin allowed his eyes to wander across the scene before him. The lights of Larkspur, Corte Madera, and Mill Valley twinkled to the southeast amidst the greenish-brown hills of Marin County, from which Mount Tamalpais tapered out towards the water.

Down below him, looking towards Richardson Bay, a flat area to the side of San Francisco Bay, was the exclusive private clinic where Ivan Goratschin was currently staying. He lived there under a false name to make sure nobody could disturb his peaceful life...and so nobody could interrupt the process of healing he had to go through, which had not yet properly begun.

Goratschin rubbed his hands over the sweaty skin of his face, and then through his short, dark hair. The corners of his mouth tightened, and he had to blink several times to fight back the tears that were welling up. *Cra All this damned crap.*

For almost thirty years he had lay in a coma! Thirty years! That was nearly ten years longer than he had gotten to live his life beforehand.

And then his awakening...*A narrow medical cot in the middle of a huge room. The ceiling is dome-shaped and reminiscent of an*

observatory. In the middle, right above his head, a narrow opening rapidly grows bigger, the deep blue sky behind it, with individual clouds hanging in it like balls of cotton wool.

He can see a sphere in the sky. At first he thinks it's the Moon, but then he realizes it's glowing silver in the sunlight and is surrounded by a bright glittering halo.

It's a spaceship!

He doesn't know how he knows that, but he is immediately certain that he's right. And there's more—it's an enemy spaceship. It must be destroyed. And he, Ivan Goratschin, is the only one who is capable of doing that.

He concentrates his mind on the sphere, senses his gift come to life in him. Whatever he has been through, he has not lost his powers. Quite the opposite—they seem to be burning more powerfully than ever in his chest.

Seconds later, the spaceship disappears in a flaming inferno. And then darkness surrounds him again.

"Unconsciousness due to excess stress" is what they told him later. That was two weeks ago. Since then, Ivan Goratschin had to cope with some very bitter news.

After waking a second time, he found himself in a small, sparsely furnished room. A young blond woman, whose clothes told him she had to be a nurse, was standing next to his bed with a small syringe in her right hand. With deft movements, she checked his vital functions, and before Goratschin could even ask a question, she had already left the room.

She was soon replaced by an elderly man, who was now standing in Goratschin's line of vision. He had thinning hair, and his back was very hunched beneath his suit, which had seen better days. He moved closer to the Russian man's bed, limping slightly as he walked, before lowering himself into the armchair next to the bed.

"My name is Homer G. Adams, and I assume you have a great

many questions, Mr. Goratschin. I'm here to answer them for you as best I can."

And that's exactly what he did, in a calm voice, but at the same time with an honesty that did not spare the listener. Goratschin learned that he, Ivan, had been seriously injured during military action in 2007 in Afghanistan, and that he had fallen into a coma as a result. Ivan had no memory whatsoever of those events.

"Am I... Am I still in Afghanistan?" he had asked.

"No, you are back in the United States. In a suburb of San Francisco, to be precise."

"What about my parents? Have they been informed? Can I see them?"

Adams had shaken his head sadly. "I'm sorry, that's not possible."

"Why not?"

"They both died many years ago."

Hearing that was bitter for Goratschin.

"And Ivanovich, my brother? Where's he?"

The elderly man had looked at him silently, and Goratschin understood immediately. That was the second bitter piece of news.

"How?" he asked, his voice getting caught in his throat.

"He died during a fire at his base. That was also...a few years ago."

Sitting on the eastern peak of Mount Tamalpais, the first hesitant rays of the sun shining on him, Goratschin felt a tear run down his face. His parents, his beloved twin brother—all dead. He could still see the faces of his mother and father clearly in his mind's eye, glowing with pride at their two magnificent sons, at the same time bravely suppressing their worry because life was not turning out the

way they had dreamed it would.

Ivan and Ivanovich had still been children, barely six years old, when the family boarded a plane in Moscow after the fall of the Iron Curtain, heading for the USA. Back then, the two brothers were literally as close as twins could be—joined at the hip, unable to be healed by the Russian healthcare system.

Once they had arrived in the United States, a donation from a megachurch in Ohio paid for the operation that separated the conjoined brothers. A long scar along one side of Goratschin's torso was still there, a witness to their plight to this very day.

Encouraged by so much goodness, the family had tried to build a new life in Los Angeles. But maybe they had picked the wrong city, maybe just the wrong neighborhood. One way or another, the Goratschins never really felt like they belonged in their new home country. This was not only true of the parents, but also of the twins.

Ivan and Ivanovich grew up as outsiders. Their giant-like, rough-looking appearance, which did not fit in with the tanned sonnyboy image of the West Coast, might have been one of the reasons for that. But some strange occurrences during their adolescence might also have played a role—cases of arson. And while nobody could prove those events had been caused by the young twins, many suspected as much even years later.

And yet, the more their environment shut them out, the more Ivan and Ivanovich tried to be real dyed-in-the-wool patriots. When they finished high school, the two brothers signed up for the army to fight for peace, justice and the American dream. Two years later, they stood voluntarily in the front row when fresh troops were being picked to be sent to crisis regions like Afghanistan and Iraq.

And there, in a Taliban-plagued shithole, my life decided to take an extended break, Ivan Goratschin thought bitterly. He balled his hands to fists and felt his powers start to activate. He quickly took a deep breath and tried to relax.

He had to be careful. Before he had fallen into a coma, he had had this unexplainable ability that allowed him to set material on

fire pretty much under control. But that was decades ago. His ability to concentrate on a specific object and make it go up in flames had suffered since then, and he did not want to cause a forest fire on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais.

An extended break... Back then, two weeks ago, when the hunchbacked Mr. Adams had already twice mentioned events during their conversation that seemed to have happened years ago, the obvious question had been on the tip of his tongue. And yet Goratschin's throat constricted as he asked it out loud. "How long, Mr. Adams?"

"Pardon?"

"You said my parents and my brother already died years ago. For how long, exactly, have I been lying in a coma?"

That was when he received the third bitter piece of information. "Mr. Goratschin, I'm afraid it's going to be quite a shock for you."

Goratschin had merely laughed, but there was no joy in it. "You've just told me that my entire family, everyone who I loved and cared about, is gone. How much worse can it get?"

"Twenty-nine years, Mr. Goratschin."

Adams was right, that exceeded anything he might have been prepared for. He could have accepted five years, perhaps ten. But, twenty-nine? "That means, the year is now..."

"2036," Adams said with a sigh, ending his sentence for him. "From where you're sitting, that must sound like science fiction."

At that moment, Goratschin lifted his hands for the very first time and held them in front of his face. He saw wrinkles, thick hair on the backs of them, skin that had aged. They were no longer the hands of a twenty-year-old, but those of a man who was nearly fifty years of age. Thirty years! He had lost three decades, the best years of his life. This thought threatened to overwhelm him.

And then another thought came to the fore. The memory of waking up for a second, a metal sphere that burst into flames in the

sky and then crashed. “Are spherical spaceships a part of this science fiction?” he asked.

Adams said nothing for a while, then he nodded and answered, “Yes.”

“Tell me about it. I want to know everything.”

The strange, hunchbacked man he had only just met sighed, and then began to talk. He told Goratschin about Perry Rhodan and the flight to the Moon. About the discovery of the crashed Arkonide spaceship. About the return to Earth and Rhodan’s idealistic dream to build a city in the Gobi Desert called Terrania, which would act as a stepping stone for humanity on their way to the stars. He spoke about the bitter hostility between Earth’s superpowers. And about Clifford Monterny, the leader of a unit of people with unusual talents, who had become mixed up in it all—initially following the orders of President Drummond, the current head of state of the USA—but then following his own agenda.

Clifford Monterny. Somehow, the name rang a bell. “I know that name from somewhere.”

“That’s possible,” Adams had answered honestly. “Monterny and your brother were stationed in Iraq together. And they collaborated later as well. Your brother took care of you while you were in a coma. And Monterny took over after he died. Don’t be mistaken, though. He may have acted in the beginning out of friendship and compassion, but, in the end you were nothing more than a tool he used to seek revenge. He made you attack the Arkonide spaceship.”

Adams left him alone to digest this fourth bitter realization—that he had only been brought back to consciousness to act as a weapon of mass destruction for an out-of-control soldier.

Before the old man left, Goratschin had asked him what was going to happen to him now.

“At the moment, you are safe. Nobody knows who you are or where you are, except for me and Rhodan. And we want nothing bad for you. We know you are only a victim in this story. You

should rest. Try to process what I have told you and to find some sense of normality again. And when you're ready, call me, *Mr. John Smith*." He'd held out a simple business card with a telephone number on it, which he placed on the table beside Goratschin's bed.

A moment later he had left, and the giant Russian had not seen him since.

Goratschin was left behind, confused and shattered by the unpleasant information he had been given. In the days following, he tried to discreetly find out how much truth was in the information Adams had given him. As he wasn't a prisoner, he was able to come and go as he pleased as long as he complied with the clinic's curfew and turned up for his treatments on time, which were designed to help him become mentally and physically fit again after his long period in a coma.

Most of what the old man had told him seemed to be true. He even found his brother's grave in Los Angeles's military cemetery. However, he was unable to find out anything about Ivanovich's life.

About a week ago, he had finally decided to let the past rest in peace. After all, it was a time he had not actively taken part in. That made it even more important to look forward and concentrate on the future. A future he was currently searching for.

That was why he used the mountain bike provided by the clinic again and again, riding over to the nearby Mount Tamalpais State Park. He was able to think when he was out here alone in nature. Or he could switch his mind off completely and test the boundaries of his body, which had aged while he was in a coma, by racing recklessly up and down the local hillsides.

And when he turned off the annoying navi-pod on his bike, he sometimes almost succeeded in imagining that he was back in the year 2007. There was no omnipresent Evernet between the raggedy bushes and low trees, no young people with data goggles on their noses, no news about self-proclaimed Terrans, white-haired Arkonides, or—most recently—thieving Fantan.

At the thought of them, Goratschin involuntarily shook his head.

In his time, the world was already on the brink of madness, but now, in the year 2036, it definitely seemed to have tipped over the edge.

The sun was now moving lazily above the horizon, and the light of the new day flooded the Bay Area. It unveiled the panorama at his feet, which had been concealed in the shadows of dawn before that, revealing it in all its majesty. He could see all the way down to the roofs of San Francisco. Behind the greenish-brown hills, which lay between him and the city, Goratschin could even see the supports that held up the Golden Gate Bridge.

For a moment, he soaked up the silence and the rays of the morning sun, and allowed the sublime view of the landscape to work on him. Then he squeezed his eyes together, irritated. Something was moving in the sky across San Francisco. Something shiny and metallic that looked like a flying saucer.

What he could see were two Fantan Flounders, the name the media had come up with to describe the flying transport platforms of the cylindrical extraterrestrials.

What the hell are they intending to do? Goratschin asked himself.

The huge spindle ship of the Fantan had landed in the Gobi two days ago, right outside the gates of Terrania. It was replaced by an even bigger ship one day later. It looked as if the Fantan wanted to pay a welcoming visit to the city Perry Rhodan had declared to be the gateway to the stars. To congratulate the Earthlings on their new space station and welcome them into the galactic community.

However, instead of bringing gifts like visitors usually would, they had spread out in their flounders all over the planet to help themselves to whatever they wanted, as if they were attending an end-of-summer sale with unlimited credit to spend. They obviously didn't see it as stealing, but as a legitimate hunt for *Besun*.

It was only to be expected that people everywhere started to resist the actions of the Fantan. People tended to be quite attached to their belongings. Most of them wouldn't even let their neighbors anywhere near them, never mind visitors from space that were so

ugly they looked like they'd jumped off the front cover of a cheap pulp fiction booklet from the 1950s.

The Fantan, however, didn't seem to be the slightest bit bothered by the resistance. In fact, it seemed as if it made the hunt for *Besun* even more exciting for them if it appeared to be of value to someone. So far, reports said, they had mainly taken smaller items such as cars, advertising boards, the D from the Hollywood sign, and a McDonald's in Cleveland—stuff like that. A few people had also been kidnapped, with Reginald Bull, Perry Rhodan's companion, being one of them, it was said.

All of a sudden, however, the Fantan seem to have become megalomaniacs. Did they seriously think they would be able to transport a steel structure that was more than two kilometers long and weighed millions of tons in their flying saucers, which were a maximum of fifty meters across? Goratschin couldn't believe it.

The sound of tires crunching on gravel shook the Russian out of his reverie. He turned his head and saw that a second mountainbiker had reached the peak. It was a young Asian woman. She was petite and wiry, wearing a sleeveless gray sports top and blue cycling shorts. A loosely braided pigtail hung over her left shoulder.

"Morning!" she called to him cheerily as she dismounted. Her voice was soft and had a slight accent.

Goratschin nodded curtly at her. Part of him registered the light, flawless skin of her slim bare legs, her pretty face reddened from cycling, and the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra beneath her tight-fitting top. A much larger part of him, however, only saw her as an intruder forcing her way into his fortress of solitude. There was a very good reason he came here so early in the morning. He loved spending two or three precious hours every day completely undisturbed.

The young woman didn't seem to notice that. As calm as anything, she removed her water bottle from its holder on the frame of her bike, took a slug, and walked over to Goratschin. "May I?" she asked, and sat down beside him on the bench without

waiting for an answer.

Goratschin just grumbled incomprehensibly.

The woman leaned against the back of the bench, kicked her legs out, and stretched her back, obviously with pleasure, as if to greet the rising sun. As she did so, she sighed blissfully. Then she looked at Goratschin.

“It’s beautiful up here in the early morning, isn’t it?”

The giant Russian just grumbled again.

“I love coming here at sunrise. The view is amazing. And there are no cycling tourists on the trails at this hour. “The corners of her mouth turned up into a conspiratorial smile, indicating that she considered the two of them to be above such weekend cyclists.

Goratschin imagined there were men who would give a great deal to have a woman like her smile at them in that way. But as flattering as he found her attempt to become more familiar with him, he was absolutely not in the mood for it at the moment.

“Sure,” he said. “It’s very peaceful and solitary here. A good place to think about things.”

Again, she didn’t take the hint—or was deliberately ignoring him. “I think so too. And a place like this to get away from it all is especially important at the moment. So many terrible things going on in the world.” She looked over at the Golden Gate Bridge, with the two Fantan flounders circling above it like hungry vultures.

Goratschin didn’t want to hear any of it. And he certainly didn’t want to talk about it. Not here, not today.

He got up. “Excuse me,” he said through clenched teeth. “I have to go.” He could hardly have been more unfriendly, but he didn’t care.

Glowering slightly, he walked towards his bike and got onto the saddle. He switched the computer to downhill mode and could feel the spring deflections on the forks adjust accordingly. Then he put

his feet to the pedals and cycled off. But instead of turning round and taking the road down the mountain, he headed towards a steep trail that began just to the side of the viewing point. Goratschin was already familiar with it. The trail was steep and rugged, not the kind of route you took recklessly at speed—which was also shown by a warning sign at the start.

The woman got up from the bench and stared at him, puzzled. “Hey, what are you doing?” she called out. “That route is dangerous, especially since it’s not really light yet! Do you want to kill yourself?”

“It’s not your problem,” Goratschin grunted at her, pushing his bike over the edge.

A second later, he had no time to think about problems or young women poking their noses into his business. His full attention was required to navigate the trail.

He flew down the mountainside at breakneck speed, swerving around obstacles and jumping over bumps on the ground. Stones and earth crunched beneath his wheels, his arm and leg muscles shivering from the tension, and the cold wind blew in his face.

He loved moments like this! Moments in which all he had to do was overcome a physical challenge, where nothing else mattered except the next stone or the next root. At no other time since waking from his coma was he able to live so much in the present, pushing the past and future out of his mind. He could forget his dead parents, his dead brother, the last thirty years of his life he had lost, and the fact that they had abused him, turning him into a weapon—none of which mattered when he was racing down the trail like this, able to feel totally free, his worries far away.

In front of him, about fifty meters downhill, a prominent rock slope that created a kind of jumping platform emerged on the trail. You could go round it if you didn’t mind taking a little detour. Or you could take it on and jump beyond it.

Goratschin put on his brakes and came to a stop. The rock slope was tricky. It tapered to become extremely narrow, and it took

courage and skill to negotiate it. If you didn't have your bike fully under control, then you risked breaking every bone in your body.

Until now, Goratschin had always ducked out. As an adolescent, he had been an enthusiastic mountain biker. No trail in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Los Angeles was too risky for him. But that was decades ago. He was out of practice, and he wasn't a young man anymore.

To hell with it! he thought angrily.

He was just about to take to the pedals to defy his own shortcomings when he suddenly heard a loud voice from behind.

"Out of the way!"

A split second later, a shadow raced past him. A blueish-green shadow with a black braid flying behind it. It was the woman he had encountered at the peak!

Without slowing down, she shot over the edge of the jump before her bike landed on the trail again, the springs screeching in protest. She was completely in control and almost made the jump look like child's play. Without stopping or even turning around to look back, she raced down the trail.

Goratschin stared after her, not believing what he had just seen. Then he blinked, and a wide grin spread across his face.

Crazy woman, he thought, but he was beginning to think he might like her after all. He lifted himself out of the saddle, and pushed powerfully against the pedals, his eyes fixed firmly on the jump. *There's no going back.* If she had no fear, then he didn't either.

He sped towards the jump, determined. His eyes narrowed, and his mouth straightened into a thin line.

Ten meters.

Five.

Two.

One.

He pulled the bike up into the air, allowing the momentum to carry him over the rocky jump. For a second, he felt like he was defying gravity. He flew through the air, and his jump seemed like it would never end. A crazy thought came to him—if he kept pedaling, would he just fly away? Keep climbing, fly past the Moon, watching it become ever paler behind him just as he had seen in old science-fiction films whose name he no longer remembered.

And then the moment passed. The Earth's gravity pulled him back into the here and now, and his tires landed with a crunching sound on the gravelly surface below the jump. The bike's suspension dropped down, and for a horrible second, Goratschin feared he would skid away and end up in the mother of all bike crashes. But he managed to catch himself. A few meters farther downhill, he zigzagged to a halt. He could feel his heart beating like a drum.

Breathless, he looked over his shoulder. From down here, the jump looked even more dangerous than from above. But it no longer struck fear into him. He had overcome it—he had conquered the demon.

With a triumphant grin, he cycled farther. Down below on the Old Railroad Grade Trail, a popular route with cycling tourists that wound its way gently upwards along the southern slope of Mount Tamalpais and marked the end of the trail, he saw a figure waiting for him. It was the woman. Goratschin wasn't especially surprised.

She waved to him. "You took your time. I was beginning to think you had turned back." She had a teasing look on her face.

Goratschin pulled the brakes and stopped right next to her. "Very funny," he answered. "Did you think that route was too dangerous for me?"

"That's not what I said. I was only saying it was dangerous. But danger is sometimes quite exciting, is it not?" She grinned at him.

The Russian only grunted.

The women boxed his upper arm playfully. “Come on, don’t be a bad loser.” She held out her right hand to him with a smile. “My name’s Ishy. Ishy Matsu.”

Without saying anything, Goratschin looked at the hand and at the unspoken offer the young woman was making him with that gesture. That was perhaps the real challenge of the morning. The jump had only been foreplay. At least he more or less knew where it was going to end. But here... Here he was leaping into the unknown. Towards a future he didn’t have the slightest clue about just half an hour before.

He slowly lifted his own right hand, and said, “I’m...”

He hesitated. *John Smith,* he thought, suddenly remembering the false identity Adams had given him.

“Ivan. Ivan Goratschin,” he said instead. “Nice to meet you.”

2.

In Titan's Depths

Saturn's moon, Titan,

August 3, 2036

Outer space...an endless expanse spread in every direction all around them, millions and billions of light years of the deepest blackness, icy cold, and absolute silence. And nothing more than a pane of glass, perhaps as thick as two of their fingers, separated them from an environment that could bring death in seconds.

Timothy Harnahan shuddered at the thought of it. He still couldn't quite believe they really were out here in space—Julian Tifflor, Mildred Orsons, and him. What madness had seized them to simply steal an Arkonide recon craft and launch from the underwater dome in the Atlantic out into space?

Of course he had already dreamed of flying to the stars when he was a child. He had enthusiastically devoured stories about young heroes who explored space on their own initiative. A dream that had ultimately brought him to Terrania. However, reading about something and actually doing it were two very different things.

How many things could have gone horribly wrong? They only had to press the wrong button and the small spaceship might have blown to pieces. Or left them drifting without a drive through space. Or they might have crashed onto the Moon as they came so close to it—not an improbable fate for spaceships these days. Especially considering that Julian, who had taken up position as pilot, had reacted to the sudden appearance of a Fantan ship while they were fleeing with an extremely daring maneuver that made it look like they could very well end up dead among the glowing remains of their destroyed spaceship in a freshly hollowed-out crater.

But luckily the tiny three-seater spaceship could be steered

intuitively, almost like a toy. Anyone who had spent their adolescence sitting at their home multimedia center playing on a space flight simulator could have flown the recon craft no problem. So it literally was child's play for Julian. He had steered the craft safely through the solar system with Timothy watching him from the co-pilot's seat. Mildred, who was sitting behind them in the emergency seat, had occasionally made a pointed remark, presumably to conceal her feeling of unease.

And now, several hours later, here they were, having defied all obstacles that may have stood in their way, flying into the endless expanse of space.

Which is not that empty after all, Timothy thought before turning his attention back to the yellow sphere that was hanging before them in the blackness of space, becoming bigger fast.

Saturn's moon was still a good fifty thousand kilometers from them, but at their current speed of five hundred kilometers per second, they would reach it in less than two minutes.

If it was a space capsule from Earth, we would be busy calculating complex decelerating maneuvers to stop us shooting past our destination and to make sure we slip into orbit as planned, Timothy was thinking. *But all we need here are a few hand movements, and we'll be parked in orbit as easily as if we had just pulled up in front of a supermarket.*

It was absolutely fantastic!

Julian cleared his throat, interrupting Timothy's chain of thought. "So, Mr. Harnahan. Let's swing into standard orbit. Ms. Orsons, open the welcome frequencies."

Timothy had to grin. Julian had watched the same old science-fiction series on television as he had. "Aye, aye, Captain!" he answered, in a playfully obedient tone.

"Idiot," Mildred complained from behind, knocking the back of her boyfriend's seat.

Julian only laughed. "Okay, I'll do it myself."

He activated the thrust control and slowed down the small ship's approach. Saturn was to the right of them. It reminded Timothy a little of a pale grapefruit that was indented at the poles. Its light gray rings made of ice and rocks could barely be seen from their perspective. But they did show themselves as clearly visible dark shadows on the surface of the gas giant.

About three thousand kilometers above Titan's surface, Julian let the recon craft slide into orbit. The moon now filled almost the entire front window, a huge chunk of rock in space, concealed beneath thick clouds.

"Here we are," Julian said, "Timothy, can you find the spot where the recon craft detected that strange burst of energy last time we flew by?"

Timothy pulled the tablet—on which he had saved the analyzed data—towards him, and then he bent over the ship's navigation instruments.

"Let's see..."

The data on the tablet originated from an encrypted transmission that the recon craft itself had sent to its mothership about a month before. That was the Arkonide spaceship, the *Aetron*, which had crashed on the Moon and had now been destroyed by an American nuclear bomb. Its commander, Thora, had undertaken a reconnaissance flight through the solar system with two of her crew, during which they had picked up a strange energy impulse that originated from the icy surface of Saturn's moon, Titan. Timothy had been able to filter it out from the signals that had ironically been received by the Arecibo radio telescope on Puerto Rico, of all places. For almost forty years, this telescope had been at the heart of the *SETI@home* project, which searched for extraterrestrial life with the help of space-travel enthusiasts from all over the world.

Information about coordinates had been sent to the *Aetron* along with the energy impulse. Timothy tried to align these coordinates with the display on the navigation instruments.

“Our destination must lie somewhere in front of us,” he finally said. “Another thousand kilometers parallel to the equator and then seven hundred kilometers in the direction of the North Pole.”

“Does that mean up or down for us?” Julian wanted to know.

“What kind of a stupid question is that?” Mildred interjected. “North is always upwards.”

Julian snorted in amusement. “The rules of map reading are a little different here in space than they are at home. How do I know how many times we somersaulted while we were fleeing from the Fantan ships? We could be standing on our heads, or hanging at a completely lopsided angle to the equator.”

“We could be,” Timothy confirmed, while looking at the data holo floating in front of them showing a three-dimensional model of the moon, as well as the information from the recon craft’s rangefinders. “But in this case, Mildred is right. North is upwards.”

Julian nodded. “I’m already on my way,” he said, boosting the engines.

“Why don’t you let the computer do the steering?” Mildred wanted to know. “Doesn’t this thing have an autopilot?”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?” Julian replied. “I’m sitting at the controls of a spaceship for the first time in my life and you want me to let the machine have all the fun. No way!”

Timothy had to grin. He knew exactly what Julian meant, as he felt the same way. “Anyway, we’re almost there,” he added.

Curious, Mildred bent forward between the two of them. She pushed her long black hair out of her face and studied the data holo. “And? What’s with your mysterious signal, Timothy?”

Frowning, Timothy’s eyes wandered to and from the navigation instruments and the data holo. “I haven’t got a clue,” he admitted. “There’s nothing there now.”

“Perhaps we should go down even lower,” Julian suggested.

“The cloud cover is pretty thick here, and that could interrupt the signal.”

“Yes, you might be right about that,” Timothy agreed.

Julian let the recon craft descend at a steep angle towards the yellow mist surrounding Titan, which was becoming thicker all the time. Extremely strong gusts of wind impacted the small ship, making it swerve dangerously from side to side.

“Watch out!” Mildred cried out to Julian.

“Don’t worry,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’ve got everything under control. Everything is under control.”

And, in fact, he did manage to more or less stabilize the ship. The deeper they penetrated into the atmosphere, the calmer the storm became.

The inhospitable wasteland of the moon’s surface became visible below them. The thermometer showed a temperature of negative one hundred and seventy degrees Celsius, and a dense orange-colored mist made up of methane, ethane, and other hydrocarbons muddied their view. A monotonous gray dunescape stretched out before them as far as the eye could see. According to the data holo, it consisted of ethane that was bonded to extremely fine particles of dust.

“Not exactly a holiday destination I would recommend to others,” Mildred commented sarcastically.

“Absolutely not,” Timothy replied. “But do you two realize that we are at a place where no humans before us have been? We are the *first* humans to visit Titan. Isn’t that fantastic?”

“Yes, it is,” Mildred had to admit. “But, to be honest, I thought this trip was going to be more interesting. Where are the rangefinder signals now?”

Timothy bit his lower lip and shook his head. “I don’t know. They’re no longer there.”

“Are the coordinates correct?” Julian asked.

“Right down to the very last number after the decimal point,” Timothy said.

“Maybe we should make ourselves noticeable,” Mildred suggested.

“And how do you propose we do that?” Julian asked over his shoulder. “We don’t have any weapons we could use to start a fireworks show.”

“Didn’t you say something about opening the welcoming frequency, Captain Tifflor?” Mildred asked cheekily.

They ordered the Positronic to send out a radio signal towards the surface of the moon—tightly focused, of course, so that they didn’t draw the Fantan’s attention again. But even after fifteen minutes of trying constantly, they were unable to elicit any reaction from the ominous sensor.

“Great!” Julian moaned.

“What now?” Mildred asked. “Should we fly back?”

“We can’t do that,” Timothy protested vehemently. “We stole the recon craft and then managed to escape the Fantan. We can’t just turn around again without having tried everything possible.”

Mildred studied him with a skeptical look. “What other options do we have?”

“Well,” Timothy said, “we know that the signal came from a saltwater ocean beneath Titan’s ice crust. If we manage to break through the ice crust, we might be able to see exactly what’s below it.”

“And how do you want to break through the crust? We don’t have any weapons we could use to burn a hole in it! Are you intending to use the ship to ram the moon’s surface?” Mildred asked, shaking her head.

“That wouldn’t be a very good idea,” Julian replied. “Titan’s outer crust is almost eighty meters thick.”

Timothy looked outside again, searching feverishly for a solution. A thought suddenly came to mind, and he snapped his fingers to show he had an idea. “Do you know the story *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne?”

Julian shook his head. “Sorry, but literary classics aren’t my thing. What are you getting at?”

“In the story,” Timothy explained, “a geology professor named Otto Lidenbrock and a few companions travel to the center of the Earth by climbing down into the depths through a volcano in Iceland. Of course, there are no volcanoes here in the conventional sense because Titan is far too cold for that. But there are cryovolcanoes—that is, ice volcanoes through which water rises up to the surface. If we can manage to find one of these volcanic vents, it might be possible to make it to the underground ocean.”

“Just a minute,” Mildred interrupted. “How can water flow in a place with temperatures this low?”

“First of all, it’s a lot warmer down there. The ocean is only about minus twenty. And it is believed that ammonia or some kind of hydrogen-containing mixture whose freezing point is far lower than water’s acts like a kind of antifreeze, making it possible for the compound escaping from the volcano to flow to the surface for a short time. By the way, areas where this occurs are called hotbeds because of their high temperatures. So all we have to do is instruct the computer to search for such hotbeds, and then search for some ideal ice volcanoes there.”

Julian and Mildred looked at one another as if Timothy had just outed himself as a Fantan in human form.

“How come you know stuff like that?” Mildred asked in disbelief. “That is literally scary.”

Timothy felt himself turn red. He hadn’t intended to sound like some kind of science nerd, but his enthusiasm had taken over.

“Ehm, well…er…I studied Titan as much as I could before we left. I thought a little knowledge might come in useful.”

Grinning, Julian thumped him on the shoulder. “That was a great idea, Timmyboy.” He turned back to the instruments. “So, let’s see whether we get come as far as Professor Lidenbrock did.”

They ordered the Positronic to analyze the surrounding area, and the onboard computer took over steering the recon craft. Taking an outward spiral flight path, the spaceship moved away from the coordinates where they should have found the signal discovered by the Arkonide woman Thora.

At the edge of the dune field, perhaps six hundred kilometers from their starting point, they found a volcanic structure. The irregularly shaped crater had a diameter of almost thirty kilometers, and white steam was coming out of it.

“Computer, analyze the volcanic vent!” Julian ordered. “Is it possible to penetrate towards the center of the moon all the way to the ocean below?”

The Positronic answered without hesitation, “This action is possible but is not to be recommended. Even if I have not detected any signs of an imminent eruption, the rangefinders have located strong tidal forces at the other end of the vent.”

“Can the recon craft withstand them?” Julian enquired.

“Yes,” the computer answered, “as long as the ship is not catapulted against the walls. It is strongly advised to hand over steering to the autopilot. The experience of the human crew members currently on board is not sufficient for such operations.”

“Thanks very much!” Julian complained.

“Hey!” Mildred said, elbowing him in the back. “The Positronic is right. We’ve only just stolen this ship. And even if it flies through space like the speedsters in that gaming arcade in Ulan-Bator, this is not an arcade machine. I don’t want to die, do you hear me?”

“Okay, okay,” Julian conceded. “Computer, take over steering

and bring us in. And while you're at it, head through the ocean to this location." He gave the Positronic the coordinates for their destination.

"Understood," the computer confirmed, and the small spaceship started moving.

They plunged into the white steam at a ninety-degree angle. If there hadn't been artificial gravity on board, all three passengers would have tipped forward in their seats.

Timothy had an unpleasant feeling in his stomach as the ship tilted to the right and left, rotating on its own axis as it wound its way into the depths of the moon without them feeling even the slightest motion. There was something surreal about it. Timothy imagined that for Julian, it must have felt like being at the controls of a flight simulator in a flashing, noisy arcade somewhere on Earth.

They could recognize almost nothing through the cockpit windows. The white steam, lit up by the ship's lamps, hid everything from view. Dark shadows sometimes appeared at the edge of their field of vision for a fraction of a second, promontories in Titan's ice crust that the autopilot was able to effortlessly avoid.

For a second, Timothy thought about whether he should ask the Positronic to feed a pseudocolor display of their surroundings into the data holo. But he decided against it. What was the use of knowing how close the ship came to the rugged walls of the volcanic vent as it sped by? They couldn't interfere now anyway. That would have been suicide.

"Thirty kilometers," Julian said. His voice also sounded tense. No human had ever ventured so deep below the surface of a planet or moon before. As far as Timothy was aware, the deepest geophysical drill into the Earth until now had only reached fifteen kilometers.

If a moonquake closes the shaft behind us, we're done for, he thought. The idea that they could be buried alive in the depths of Titan made him shiver.

The recon craft moved forward in the vent at a speed that was relatively cautious compared to what it was capable of. The instruments showed two hundred and fifty meters per second. That was still nine hundred kilometers per hour, though. It wouldn't even take them six minutes to pass through the vent. No human pilot could have managed a feat like that.

"Fifty kilometers," Julian announced, breathing out audibly.

Mildred moved closer to him. "The next time I get the idea of stealing a spaceship with you, talk me out of it, okay?"

Julian grinned. "No way!" But he also looked a little pale.

About ninety seconds later, the Positronic spoke again, "We have now reached the ocean layer beneath the outer crust. I will decelerate and head towards the coordinates for our destination."

The recon craft slowed down to fifty meters per second, and in the data holo Timothy could see the frontal protective shield become stronger. Right after that, the small spaceship shuddered as it passed through the surface of the water.

From one second to the next, their environment changed completely. They were suddenly surrounded by total darkness, and the yellowish beams of light from the ship's lamps dispersed in the murky, icy ocean after a few hundred meters.

Timothy glanced at the readings. "There isn't any life down here, is there?" he asked the board computer.

"No," the Positronic replied. "There may be protobiotic structures or elementary microorganisms. But my rangefinders are not set to detect them."

"As long as there aren't any giant octopuses or other monsters, I'm quite happy," Timothy murmured. As exciting as he found their excursion, he still wasn't entirely comfortable with their present location.

In uneasy silence, the three of them waited for the recon craft to reach its destination. A few minutes later, they were there.

“Attention! We are approaching our intended coordinates,” the Positronic announced. “I am measuring a large object there. Spherical. Its diameter is two hundred meters. An analysis of the construction materials shows that it is a—”

“I can see it!” Timothy interrupted the computer. His eyes widened as they took in the leviathan that was hanging below the ice in the depths of Titan. “It’s an Arkonide battleship!”

3.

Crisis under Water

Close to the Azores

August 3, 2036

Allan D. Mercant felt exhausted that morning as he walked through the corridors of the underwater dome, which lay hidden on the bed of the Atlantic Ocean not far from the Azores. He was going to have to inform the others of some hard decisions and make a few more besides.

Since the Fantan had turned up on Earth, the world was once again on the brink of global crisis—a crisis that was not one iota less serious than the one Perry Rhodan's discovery of the Arkonides on the Moon had triggered.

Back then we had trouble; now we have trouble. But last time, I only had to escape from Homeland Security, and that even had some pleasant moments. The corners of his mouth twitched a little as he thought about Iga Tulodziecki, the female trucker who had transported him halfway across the USA before they'd parted ways in New Orleans. Her nickname was *Wonderbra*, but certainly not because she needed one. Mercant had made sure of that personally and in close proximity. Their little tete-a-tete in the cabin of Iga's gigatruck might have been casual for both sides, but Mercant—just like Iga—wouldn't forget it easily.

He wondered how she was doing. Hopefully she wasn't having any problems with the Fantan. He was having enough trouble himself with these strange, scaly cylinder-beings with tentacles—and on only three hours of sleep. They were the reason Mercant had invited the inner circle of the Terran Union to a crisis meeting.

The Terran Union... He suppressed a sigh. The organization was causing him a great deal of bellyache at the moment. In reality, it didn't yet exist. The time since Rhodan had called the Terran Union

into being above the rooftops of Terrania had been far too short to build any formal structures. At present, everyone was doing what they could do best. Mercant was good at coping with crises. Which is why he had been appointed the acting...

Yes, what had they appointed him? he asked himself. *President? King? Lord Admiral? We don't even have a title for our leaders.*

The old secret service agent reached the door of the conference room and held his breath for a second. He saw his reflection in the shinily polished metal hatch, in every respect a perfectly ordinary sixty-five-year-old man who now had nothing but a white ring of hair left on his almost-bald head. Only the skin on his face looked almost youthful despite the events of the past weeks doing everything they could to cause him wrinkles.

He stiffened, took a deep breath, and entered.

"Good morning everyone." He nodded at the circle of people present, all of whom were thankfully already there.

Lesly K. Pounder, the former Flight Director of NASA, Homer G. Adams, an eccentric multi-billionaire, the two telepaths John Marshall and Tatiana Michalovna, the Arkonide scientist Crest, as well as the doctor and Nobel laureate Dr. Frank M. Haggard.

Only a few weeks ago, nobody in that room had known each other. Now, they formed Mercant's cabinet, and in collaboration with a few others, they managed the business of what was called the Terran Union.

"Sit down, everyone," Mercant said, gesturing for them to take their places at the oval table in the middle of the room. He didn't have a clue what purpose this chamber had fulfilled for the earlier occupants of the dome. It could just as easily have been a dining room or the private salon of the gentleman of the house where he enjoyed a round of poker every now and then.

When everyone was ready and had been served drinks by an orderly, Mercant bent forward at the top end of the table. "Thank you for coming here this morning, and on such short notice despite

all your other responsibilities. There are a few important decisions to be made about what our next steps should be. However, I'm afraid I have to begin with an unpleasant announcement."

He paused deliberately.

"According to all the information and estimates at our disposal, we have to assume that Perry Rhodan is dead!"

Everyone in the room grew immediately restless. While Adams seemed to take the news very casually, Pounder shook his head, and Tatiana Michalovna expressed her disbelief.

"What makes you say something like that?" she asked Marshall.

The former secret service man lifted his hand, signaling for everyone to calm down. "I don't actually know anything for sure. But I can calculate probabilities. A week has passed since Rhodan left for Vega. He answered a call for help, meaning he was flying into a crisis region. And he left in a ship that should never have launched when you consider all the damage it had already suffered. As we have heard nothing from the expedition since, when it comes to all matters pertaining to the Earth and the Terran Union, we must assume that Rhodan and the others will not be returning. The same applies for Mr. Bull and his companions, who were kidnapped by the Fantan. We can no longer stand around waiting for them to return. We now have to rely on ourselves to cope with the problems currently facing us."

Marshall wanted to protest again, but Mercant indicated to him that he wasn't finished speaking yet.

"Our problems come from an acute crisis and a potential danger. I am speaking of the Fantan and the transmitter down here in the dome. The Fantan situation is about to turn into a hot conflict, and we can't allow that to happen. That's why I have instructed Bai Jun in Terrania to react harshly to any attacks on the Fantan. The world's governments have been asked to follow his example."

"People are defending themselves against the Fantan," Michalovna commented. "Is it not their right to defend themselves

when they are robbed of their possessions and perhaps even people they love?"

Mercant pulled a face. He secretly agreed with the telepath, but he had to keep his eye on the big picture.

"Believe me, I don't like having to react this way. However, uncoordinated, random acts of counter-violence are not the solution. We cannot risk people's resistance spreading to become a wildfire we can no longer control, one that might consume the planet. Individual states might use the situation caused by an uncoordinated fight against the Fantan as an excuse to rekindle old animosities and conflicts over who owns what. The situation on Earth continues to be highly unstable, which is why we have to suffer the Fantan for the time being—until we have found an effective strategy to drive them from Earth with a fast and decisive attack."

The reaction to his words was a circle of grim nods. Nobody liked what was happening. But Mercant's arguments were not to be contradicted. And yet everyone realized that the *effective strategy* he had mentioned must be found soon, otherwise they would be facing a war, and who knew what the consequences of that might be.

"And now let's talk about the potential danger," Mercant continued after a brief moment of silence. "I'm referring to the transmitter in the dome. According to Crest, it is not of Arkonide origin. We haven't got a clue what this...artifact is. Who brought it here? And why? I'm sure that numerous scientists will have a great deal of joy studying it at some point, but at present, I only see it as one thing: a vulnerability. The transmitter was used or is used to travel to another place. We don't know where that place is, and we don't know who or what might use it as a way to get to Earth. As we already have enough problems, I have ordered that the energy supply be terminated. It will be switched off very soon."

"Is that not a mistake?" Dr. Haggard interrupted. "The transmitter may represent a certain risk, but it also provides us with an enormous opportunity. We know that this entire complex here is Arkonide technology from thousands of years ago. We also know that the call for help we received from Vega was sent using an

Arkonide code that was thousands of years old. Crest has confirmed that Kerlon is an Arkonide name. Is it therefore so absurd to think that this dome and Kerlon, whoever that may be, might be connected in some way? Could the transmitter not bring us directly to him and therefore to Rhodan?"

Mercant shook his head. "Such speculations are understandable, Dr. Haggard, but the transmitter could just as easily lead to anywhere in the universe. And even if it brings us to this Kerlon, we don't know whether Rhodan is with him. All we know is that Kerlon's world was overrun by lizards. And I don't know how you see things, but I have quite enough on my plate coping with *one* extraterrestrial aggressor on Earth."

Adams cleared his throat and spoke. "Concerning Rhodan, I would like to make another suggestion. I have—very discreetly, of course—had several men worldwide identified who look very much like Rhodan. We could replace him with a doppelganger and make it look as if Rhodan has returned to Earth. That way, we would take away some of the pressure the Terran Union has been suffering since his disappearance. Ultimately, we all know that Perry Rhodan has become more than a mere man—he is now a symbol."

"And what would happen when people found out that we've presented them with a fake symbol?" Mercant responded. "The Terran Union would lose every last ounce of credibility. I think it would be a very risky move. In my opinion, it would be better to turn Rhodan into a martyr, a great pioneer of the future who was willing to give his life in outer space for the dream of a unified humanity. If we can present that in a convincing manner, then people will follow us again. But I think the propaganda question is secondary at the moment. Responding to the Fantan crisis is much more important. After all, the inhabitants of Earth—and above all, the politicians from the superpowers—will not judge the Terran Union by its words, but by its acts. So, what can we do?"

"Well, we've taken over this Arkonide station," Tatiana Michalovna commented. "It must be useful for something."

"I personally think the ship over there on the ocean floor is much more interesting," Pounder suggested. "It is a warship, after all, and

it still seems to be fully functional. If we could somehow get into that giant ship, it might provide us with a means of chasing off the Fantan."

Mercant nodded. "I agree with you on that. The only question that remains is how we are going to gain access to it. Our first attempt to enter ended in disaster. The dome's positronic seems to accept us, but the ship's systems appear to operate independently."

"Maybe we can hack into the ship's computer from here," Marshall suggested, "and perhaps force it to cooperate."

"I'm afraid that won't work," Crest interjected. The Arkonide scientist had listened without comment so far. Now that the conversation had turned to an area where he had some experience, he livened up a bit. "First of all, a positronic has a far more complex structure than any Earthly computer. Secondly, the algorithms it is based on are in a programming language that is totally alien to your specialists. And I can't help you there. I'm not a positronic programmer. There's also something else to consider—even if you managed after a time to understand the principles of Arkonide computer architecture, that doesn't mean you could hack into the *Tosoma's* computer. What we have here is the positronic of a warship that is about ten thousand years old. Both its age and purpose mean enormous additional barriers to any kind of attack. One error and we might all be dead."

Crest's explanations were met with a subdued silence.

"How about tackling this by taking the hard route?" Pounder growled. "A targeted EMP hit against the ship should shut off its defense systems, at least for a while. If we go in fast enough, we might be able to gain control of it before the positronic has recovered."

"That seems to be a rather risky way of going about it," Mercant said. "The outcome you describe is purely hypothetical. If we're unlucky, the ship could be protected against EMP hits, see it as an attack, and destroy everyone it considers to be an enemy. Or, even worse—we are successful, but end up frying the equipment. Then we would own a warship that was completely useless to us."

Mercant, Pounder, and the others went through a few suggestions, but none of their plans seemed to promise enough success that Mercant could give his consent in good conscience.

Finally, Dr. Haggard spoke up. “Perhaps we’re looking at the problem from an excessively technical point of view,” he said. “Maybe another perspective is needed.”

Mercant gestured for him to continue.

“I don’t know much about this kind of technology,” Haggard said, “but I do know a lot about another topic: humans. And Arkonides as well most recently,” he added, looking at Crest.

“What are you trying to say?” the alien asked him.

“I examined the chamber with the stretchers that we found the first time we looked around the dome. I think these stretchers were used to put whoever lay on them into an artificial cryogenic sleep. Several of them were used for a long time. Analyses of DNA samples I took show that those who slept there were Arkonides—probably members of the crew of the *Tosoma*. One series of samples that don’t come from the stretchers themselves, but from the control units, show an unusual irregularity. Unlike the other samples, that DNA has an unnatural constancy.”

“In what way?” Crest wanted to know.

“To answer that, I have to provide some explanation so that everyone here can understand,” Haggard said. “As you perhaps know, DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, is a biomolecule that can be found in every living creature we know of. It carries our genetic information. In the cells of eukaryotes—that is, creatures whose cells have a nucleus, which includes both humans and Arkonides, the majority of the DNA is organized in the form of chromosomes. The ends of the chromosomes are called telomeres. They consist of an identically repeating DNA sequence as well as associated proteins, and they act to make the chromosomes stable. Every time a cell divides, thus doubling the chromosomes, the telomeres become a little shorter. If the length of the telomeres falls below a critical minimum, the cells can no longer divide. The result is that

the cell dies or it stops growing permanently."

Mercant cleared his throat. "Please get to the point, doctor. We're not sitting in a biology lesson here."

"Just a second, Mr. Mercant. As I said, the telomeres at the ends of the chromosomes become shorter through cell division. That means that we can learn something about how healthy the cells are from the telomere length, as well as the approximate life expectancy. This is where it gets interesting! While all other DNA samples showed more or less normal cell aging—and I say *more or less* deliberately, because in this case extended periods of cryostasis might have had an impact on the cell-aging process that I am not familiar with—whoever had this special DNA does not appear to have aged for the entire time."

"Might it not be that all of the samples you took from that one person came from the same day?" Crest asked, seemingly the only one who had understood what Haggard had said.

The doctor shook his head. "That's what I thought at first. However, as that seemed a little improbable, I used C14 dating, also known as the radiocarbon method, to analyze the age of the samples. Now, the results are not a hundred percent certain, because whoever's DNA it was may have been exposed to very different types and concentrations of radiation during his lifetime than we are here on Earth. However, it at least looks as if the traces of DNA were left behind over a period of several thousand years! It's therefore possible that a member of the *Tosoma* crew is still alive!"

"Oh, great," said Mercant. "Yet another problem: an immortal Arkonide. And how, may I ask, is that supposed to help us?"

"It might provide us with access to the *Tosoma*," Haggard answered with a knowing smile. "That is, if Crest is prepared to help us."

4.

Encounter with Eternity

Saturn's moon, Titan

August 3, 2036

"Oh man, the thing is nothing but a wreck!" Julian cried as he inspected the Arkonide spaceship they had found beneath Titan's layers of ice.

Timothy had to agree with him. The two-hundred-meter colossus floating in the ice-cold water of the deep ocean looked as if it had just plowed its way through an asteroid field—like those you saw in Hollywood films, with huge rocks tumbling around and defying all the laws of physics.

Enormous holes were gaping open on the matte gray body of the ship, which had been eaten away by the passing of time in the salty water of the ocean. The interiors of entire decks—with pipes, metal struts, and structural frames—were hanging out of them like steely intestines.

The typical equatorial ring, where the engines were located, circled the middle of the spacesphere. It had been torn open with enormous impact in two places. Timothy supposed those had been caused by the drives exploding.

"What could possibly have caused such damage to an Arkonide ship of this size?" Mildred asked, shocked by the sight.

"I'm not sure if I want to know that," Julian replied. "But it looks like it was involved in a space battle—and lost."

While their recon craft slowly approached the strange ship, Timothy realized his friend's guess about what had happened seemed to fit more and more with what he saw. In fact, the damage looked less like it had been caused by the impact of a crash and

more like holes had been blasted in it by some kind of weapon. The black traces of near misses were visible in several places on the scarred rump of the ship. And the edges of the wounds that had been cut into the body of the giant looked like they had melted from the thermal effects of some unknown form of energy. Some opponent had shot this Leviathan down from the heavens with unimaginable force.

"What's with the signal?" Mildred asked. "Are we receiving anything?"

"No," the Positronic announced. "The spaceship is emitting no impulses."

"Computer, what kind of ship is it?" Julian wanted to know. "Can you tell us more about it?"

"I'm afraid this exact category of ship is not in my database," the recon craft's computer answered. "The size suggests it is a Heavy Cruiser. And the state of ruin that its construction materials are in shows it to be more than ten thousand years old."

"What kind of symbols are these?" Timothy asked, pointing at some barely legible writing on the side. "Is that maybe the name of the ship?"

"Correct," the Positronic confirmed. "It is called the IGITA. Unfortunately my database does not contain a ship of this name."

"In other words, what we have here is an ancient, totally shot-up wreck that can't help us at all," Julian said, summing up their situation.

"How can you say such a thing?" Timothy cried. "We haven't even looked around on board yet. Who knows what we might find there?"

"And how are we supposed to get on board?" Mildred asked her friend. "Look at that thing!"

Timothy wasn't going to give up so easily. "But only a short time ago it sent out an energy impulse, which means it must have

residual energy somewhere on board." He looked towards the ceiling, where the voice of the Positronic came from. "Confirm that, Computer."

"That is not possible," the computer said, shattering his hopes. "I cannot detect any residual energy on board. It seems as if the batteries in the emergency transmitter that sent the signal are now empty."

"After working for ten thousand years?" Timothy asked in disbelief. "That is so unlikely from a statistical point of view that I don't even want to start trying to calculate it."

"If you would like, I can calculate—"

"No, I wouldn't like that, thank you very much," Timothy interrupted the computer. "Just tell me how we get on board."

The Positronic was silent for a good half-minute before it spoke again. "There are several areas inside the fuselage that have not yet been flooded. I have detected an airlock for auxiliary craft that leads to one such area. As the ship's power source is no longer intact, I will have to link up with the local control network and try to open and then close the airlock using remote energy transmissions. Whether or not that is successful depends on me finding an interface between my calculation logs and those of the cruiser."

Timothy looked at Julian and Mildred in anticipation.

"Okay," Julian agreed, nodding. "Let's try it!"

Again he had the computer take care of the details of their plan. The instruments of the recon craft flashed and changed their color patterns while the Positronic independently connected to the Arkonide spaceship.

Shortly after that, a strip of lights flared up in the gray fuselage before their eyes, and a hatch—about thirty meters across and eight meters from top to bottom—began to silently open. At the same time, a reddish energy shield that protected the auxiliary craft's

hangarfrom flooding was activated.

Without even waiting for the hatch to open all the way, the recon craft jumped forward and penetrated the energy shield. Floating, the small spaceship rotated on its own axis until the bow was once again facing the hangar opening, and then it landed gently on the hangar floor.

The hatch was already lowering again while the energy shield flickered alarmingly. It wasn't quite enough. The hatch was still about twenty centimeters from the floor when the reddish glow went out. A strong swell of icy seawater shot noisily through the gap and flooded the floor of the hangar. But a second later the gap closed as the extremely heavy hatch touched the hangar floor with a loud groaning sound.

"That was close," Julian commented drily.

"I'm afraid my options for feeding energy into the cruiser are limited," the computer informed them in a defensive tone.

"It's okay. It all went well."

Timothy, Julian, and Mildred looked around the hangar. It stretched a few dozen meters down into the depths and looked as if it generally accommodated four auxiliary craft. At the present time, however, the large hall was completely empty, with the exception of a few very rundown-looking service platforms. The floor, walls, and ceiling were made of dull metal. At the rear, two hatches led deeper into the interior of the spaceship.

"So, are we getting out, then?" Mildred asked.

Timothy glanced at the environmental controls. "Not without spacesuits," he said. "The concentration of methane and ammonia out there is far too high to breathe the air unfiltered. It would poison us, to say nothing of the smell."

Julian got up from where he was sitting. "Okay, let's go. If we help one another, we'll be faster."

They quickly donned the Arkonide spacesuits, which were part

of the standard equipment of a recon craft. After they had closed the fully transparent helmet and checked their oxygen supplies, they ordered the Positronic to open the hatch.

The cockpit opened with a hissing sound, and they climbed down the outer shell towards the ground.

Julian switched on the beamer that was integrated into his suit. Timothy and Mildred did the same. The sharp light beams did not add much to the light of the lamps on the front of the craft, and it didn't look like the large spacesphere had anything valuable to offer.

"I suggest we try to get to the core of the ship," Julian said, turning towards the two hatches. "If there's anything interesting for us, it'll be there."

"As long as you don't suggest we split up so that we're faster, I'm with you," Mildred commented. "There's nothing stupider than splitting up in a dark, strange, and potentially dangerous place."

Julian grinned. "Don't worry. We'll stick together and maintain constant radio contact. Apart from that, I've got this." He pulled out an Arkonide thermo-beamer.

"Where did you get that from?" Timothy asked, surprised.

"It was lying around in the recon craft, in a drawer next to the spacesuits," Julian casually replied. "The Arkonides obviously know that discretion is the better part of valor."

As the board computer of their spaceship had cut off contact to the heavy cruiser again, they had to lift the heavy hatch manually. Luckily, the Arkonide ships had similar emergency systems.

Behind the hatch was a long corridor leading straight into absolute darkness. There were occasional holes in the wall where cables had exploded. Water dripped through from some places in the ceiling, no doubt coming from the flooded sections. It was a depressing sight to see—and things didn't get any better as they made their way into the belly of the ship.

They climbed up a steep shaft where, under normal circumstances, an antigrav field would have made it easy to move comfortably from one level to the next. Now, however, they had to use the rungs that had been fitted to the wall. Timothy made the mistake of looking down at one point. The beam of light from the lamp in his suit slid downwards into the seemingly never-ending depths. It made him feel dizzy and forced him to press himself tightly against the shaft wall. After that, he made sure to keep his eyes fixed rigidly on the rungs in front of him.

After they had gone along a few more corridors—having twice had to turn back when a corridor ended in a hatch with water behind it—they reached a room that had to be the control center.

The expansive chamber was spherical, and there were tables on a podium at its center, across which holographic displays had perhaps floated at some time in the past. There were two galleries going up the curved walls, which contained workstations for crew members. Everything there was dead. Not a single lamp was lit on any of the numerous control panels.

In some places, dark stains and cinderlike crusting could be seen. Timothy asked himself whether these were the last remains of the crew. And again, he wondered what had actually happened here. Had these men and women died when their ship crashed, burning, into Titan, somehow melting its way through the kilometers-thick cover of ice? Or had they been trapped in here only to die terribly after weeks or months of holding out?

“If you ask me, this excursion is a total flop,” Julian piped up after he had taken a look around. “This ship is over and done with. Such a pain. I was really hoping we would find something down here like a second Venus refuge. Something we could have used against the Fantan to chase them from the Earth.” He kicked his foot angrily against a pile of cinders, causing them to topple into dust.

“What will we do now? Fly back to Earth?” Mildred asked.

Julian suddenly got a determined look on his face. “I say we get out of here and fly to Venus instead. Perhaps we can persuade the

refuge to intervene."

Mildred shook her head. "Are you mad? That would be suicide."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, first, the refuge is obviously hiding from the Fantan, otherwise we would have already heard from them. That means they won't exactly be thrilled by your attempt to pull them into this. Secondly, it almost destroyed the recon craft we're using once before. How do we know it won't try to do that a second time?"

"That's ridiculous," Julian answered. "I think..."

Timothy—who had been silently following the conversation of his two companions—never found out exactly what Julian thought. Something else had grabbed his attention. It was a sort of...whispering in the earphones of his helmet.

He turned down the volume of his friends' voices and switched off the external noise completely. If Julian and Mildred had a different opinion on something, it would take some time until they reached agreement—he knew that much about their relationship.

He concentrated and realized he was right. Something was whispering into his helmet. He didn't know of any better way to describe the noise, even if "whispering" wasn't quite the right term either. A second later it occurred to him that his radio receiver might be damaged. However, the spacesuit controls showed no malfunctions.

Timothy moved back and forth, then took two steps towards a hatch off to the side. Was he mistaken or was the whispering sound louder in this direction? He went a little farther, and the sound in his helmet got louder.

"Hello?" he said. "Is anybody there?"

He heard Julian and Mildred raising their voices behind him. The question of what to do next seemed to be affecting their tempers. However, he couldn't understand any of the details through his helmet and the methane-filled atmosphere.

Timothy let them argue. Instead, he directed his attention towards the hatch. He noticed that it was slightly ajar, just wide enough to let a slim man in a spacesuit through. A voice in the back of his head warned him that he should not start exploring alone. But the whispering in his helmet was louder, and anyway, Julian and Mildred were right in the next room.

He carefully pushed his way through the gap.

i...o...y..., the voice in his helmet whispered. *imo...y...*

Is that my name? Timothy asked himself, confused. Who or what on board could know his name? He was overcome by a strange feeling of excitement, something between fear and curiosity. It might have been smarter to turn back. It might have also been smarter to contact Julian and Mildred by radio. But he was already beyond those options.

He crossed the room he was now in, a chamber filled with technical equipment whose functions he did not understand. At the end of the room was another hatch, this time wide open.

Timothy...

The whispering was still very quiet, barely audible. But the bodiless voice in his helmet was clearly speaking his name.

“I’m here,” he answered, his voice shaking with excitement. “Where are you?”

With his heart beating, he entered the dark room behind the hatch. To his amazement, he found himself on a narrow ramp that led straight into the darkness. He lit the way with the beamer in his spacesuit, and he could recognize another spherical room behind it, but it was empty except for the ramp, which extended several meters inside. The walls were covered by a strange honeycomb structure that had become fragile over the millennia. The floor of the chamber was covered in brackish water.

Suddenly a light flared up in the middle of the space less than ten meters from where he was standing. The light source shone up

over the edge of the ramp, glowing like a newborn star and shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow. It was a globe, about the size of a fist, and it seemed to float through the air on its own.

His eyes widened in surprise, Timothy watched as the glowing, sparkling globe moved towards him and came to a stop, floating in mid-air less than two meters from where he stood.

Welcome, Timothy, he heard, and it became clear that the whispering was not coming from his helmet, but inside his head. *I have had to wait a very long time for you.*

Timothy swallowed.

He had reckoned with a great many things. An Arkonide robot that still worked ten thousand years later. A fragment of the Positronic that had withdrawn into an autonomous computer system. Perhaps even an Arkonide himself in a cryogenic sleep. But this here...this...*being*...exceeded his wildest dreams. And Timothy had no doubt whatsoever that the globe was a living thing. He could sense its vibrant aura, if only faintly.

“Who are you?” he asked, fascinated. His stomach was in a tight knot but he somehow knew he did not have to be afraid of the shining globe. It did not intend to do him any harm.

I am me, the globe answered, the soft whispering of its voice reverberating directly in his head. This being was obviously a telepath.

“Don’t you have a name?” Timothy wanted to know.

I need no name, the globe answered. *There are no more of my kind anymore unless they have been created by chance, just as I was. But I realize that you as a human need a name. You can...* Timothy was overcome by a feeling of exhilaration. *You can call me Harno.*

Harno? Timothy thought, confused. He had not heard that name since leaving high school. It was the nickname Timothy’s friends had given him, derived from his surname Harnahan, because there was another boy in the same class called Timothy, who had already

taken the name Tim.

“How do you know that name?” hey asked. But he already knew the answer before the stranger answered.

Your thoughts are my thoughts, Timothy. How else could I speak to you?

Timothy bit his lower lip. *Great!* His mind and his emotions were an open book for this creature. It was time to find out a little more about “Harno.” “Your thoughts are unfortunately not the same as mine. So tell me, what are you?” he asked.

I am me, Harno repeated. Its voice was marked by a boundless equanimity, while a kaleidoscope of colors shimmered across its body. *I was born of the light of the stars and the winds of the cosmos long before the first early humans longingly stretched out their hands to the sky. Since then I have been traveling, wandering through space, which fetters me as little as time itself does. I am a seeker, Timothy, just like you. I am searching for the wonders of the universe. And infinity and eternity are my only companions.*

Timothy swallowed. The words sounded like something out of a fairy tale. If everything Harno said were true, the fist-sized, shimmering globe of light was the most enviable creature in the galaxy. It enjoyed complete and utter freedom, able to surrender itself fully to perhaps the strongest feeling known to life—the thirst for knowledge—a curiosity about all the fantastic things that existed out there in the depths of outer space.

“But…ehm…” Timothy said, clearing his throat. “If you are as all-powerful as you say, then what are you doing here? And why did you wait for me?”

I did not say that I was all-powerful, Timothy, Harno contradicted him. *I too can die if that which I need to live is taken from me.*

“And what is that?”

The light of the stars. It’s what feeds me. It is to starlight that I owe my powers, which allow me to overcome space and time. But it is dark

down here. Darkness has dominated for thousands of years. And I, who was only a guest on board this ship, am starving, just as those starved to death who were sunk in the depths of this moon with me. Harno's thoughts were touched by grief, and its body glowed for a moment in tones of blue and violet.

"You've been locked in here for thousands of years?" Timothy gasped.

Yes, Harno confirmed. *I was unable to free myself on my own. Emptiness is where I am at home, not the liquid sphere that surrounds this ship. But then I saw strangers coming in the sky above this moon. I called them, but they did not answer.*

"The signal," Timothy realized. "You sent the signal we thought was an Arkonide radio beacon. But why didn't you send me and my friends another sign? We almost flew home without achieving anything."

I was too weak, Harno told him. *But I knew that it would not be necessary to call you. You are like me, Timothy. Your curiosity led you to me. And now I ask you to help me. Bring me to the sun. Its light will heal me.* Harno floated a little closer. *Help me, Timothy, and I will help you.*

"In what way?"

Instead of answering, Harno flinched backwards a little. Then its globe-like body began to swell up. It continued to grow until its diameter was a good half meter. And then the shimmering on its surface suddenly changed, becoming paler as a picture appeared showing a three-dimensional image of another place.

Timothy coughed. The picture showed a man and a woman sitting on a rocky ledge in the strange blue light of an alien sun. Judging from the length of the shadows, it was evening and, as he could see, they were involved in a private conversation.

"The Positronic informed me that you were still in the control center," the woman was saying.

The man nodded.

"According to the Positronic's protocol, you tried—using the instruments that still work—to observe the Topsidan's fleet movements and reconstruct their strategy."

"As much as possible. It is, by the way, very easy to do when you know that the *Tosoma X* is more than ten thousand years old."

"You mean, compared to the lifetime of machines made by humans."

"Hm," he grumbled, and the movement of his head showed he was considering what she had said. "I can't say. We haven't been building machines for that long. And yet there are already some steam locomotives, for example, that have been running on railway tracks for hundreds of years."

"Running every single day?"

The hint of a smile could be seen around the edges of the man's lips. "On the days of the steam locomotive."

The man you call Perry Rhodan is alive, Harno said. *Bring me to the sun, and I will be able to set things in motion that will help you to rescue him and also to free you from the suffering you are all exposed to. Everything is going to be fine, Timothy. Believe me.*

Timothy nodded. He believed Harno, even if there was no rational justification to do so, because all Timothy had seen so far were a few magic tricks, albeit amazing ones. But there was something about Harno that made him trust it.

He switched his radio back on. Julian's worried voice came through right away.

"...othy! Damn! Where are you? Answer me, Timothy!"

"I'm here," he said, speaking into his helmet microphone. "In a chamber to the left of the control center. You have to come here right away. I've discovered something unbelievable!"

5.

Different than the others

San Francisco

August 3, 2036

The next few days were wonderful and exciting in equal measure for Ivan Goratschin. That made it surprisingly easy for him to forget his worries and banish them from his mind for a while. He spent every minute of his free time with Ishy, who, as she said, was employed by a real estate agent in San Francisco but currently had a two-week vacation.

They went hiking, toured with their mountain bikes through the hilly countryside of Marin County, and one evening Ishy invited him to the cinema—a date for which Ivan had to arrange special permission from the clinic management because patients usually had to be in by ten.

The film they went to see was the more than eighty-year-old science-fiction classic *War of the Worlds* by Byron Haskin and George Pal. It was a film that the manager of the small and nostalgic-looking cinema—a gray-bearded man in his mid-sixties—had included in his schedule two months ago. People were now finding it rather relevant in the face of the Fantan invasion.

After the film, Ishy and Ivan went to an Asian fast food place on Clement Street to have something to eat. The interior resembled the cinema they had just come from—it was old and a little worn, but very cozy in its own way.

Ivan asked himself if Ishy was subtly trying to please him in a way that was very inherent to her culture. He had told her about his thirty years in a coma and how hard he found it to adapt to the technical and cultural changes that had happened in the meantime. *Or maybe she's just trying to subtly tell me how she sees me,* he thought sarcastically. *As a slightly grayed man who at the same time gives her a*

feeling of security.

Ivan had never had many friends apart from his brother, either when he was a child or during high school. And there had been no girls who were seriously interested in the giant, pale-skinned twins. Naturally he'd had the occasional casual flirtation. But either the girl just wanted to prove she could have any boy she wanted—even one of the two exotic Russians at the school—or she was a total outsider herself, and Ivan, who actually wanted to belong, was scared of becoming too attached.

Things were very different with Ishy. She did not come across as being arrogant or pretentious in any way. Instead, she had a disarmingly unselfconscious and natural manner that he found attractive. And she did not come across as an outsider. It was true, he had not yet met any of her friends, which suited him just fine at the moment, but he would have been very surprised if this petite woman with the girlish charm didn't have a large social circle.

Everything about her is perfect, Ivan thought, not for the first time in the past few days. Even the fact that the pinkie of her left hand was missing as the result of an accident did not diminish her perfection.

"What are you thinking about?" Ishy asked, interrupting his reverie.

Ivan hesitated. He didn't like talking about his feelings. How could he explain to Ishy that the closeness that had developed between them made him feel confused? A feeling that had two sides to it. On the one hand, he still felt like the twenty-year-old he had been before he fell into a coma inside, who could never have imagined developing feelings for a woman ten years older. On the other hand, he found it hard that he was actually twenty years older than she was.

And yet both of them seemed in many ways to be much younger than they were. It was very obvious that Ishy liked him exactly the way he was, just as he liked her. *So what am I so worried about?* he asked himself. *I should enjoy the happiness I've found.*

He gave her a crooked smile. “It’s nothing,” he said, answering her question. “I’m just glad...”

Again he hesitated. In his mind’s eye he saw the jump on Mount Tamalpais, the place on the trails that only really bold cyclists would dare to jump from. And then he saw Ishy, with her wild call of “Out the way!” rushing past him to shoot over the edge. She had conquered not only the trail but also Ivan’s heart—had veritably taken it by storm.

“I’m happy we met each other,” he said, smiling a little awkwardly.

Ishy’s cheeks reddened slíghtly, and a glint appeared in her eye. “I’m glad too,” she said quietly.

Shortly after that, they paid and walked back to Ishy’s car. It was a mild summer evening, and the roads and sidewalks were still quite busy. But there was something oppressive in the air, as if the dark clouds of a storm were gathering over the heads of the citizens of San Francisco. Somewhere in the distance they could hear a whining sound coming from the drive of a flying machine. It was a familiar sound these days; a Fantan flounder was flying over the city in search of *Besun*.

Ivan shook his head lightly. He didn’t want to think about the Fantan now. Not this evening.

Ishy’s car, an Asian brand, which was actually too small for Ivan’s giant stature, was parked in a side street of the main drag. The car greeted Ishy by flashing its lights twice. Many cars locked and unlocked themselves independently nowadays, he had learned. You only had to have a specially coded radio chip in your bag.

They got in, put on their seatbelts, and sat in silence for a moment. Ishy looked over at him from the driver’s seat. All of a sudden she seemed shy and vulnerable to Ivan. “And now?” she asked.

Ivan suppressed the impulse to look at his watch. He knew that it was late and that he should return to the clinic. But that would

have been the end of this wonderful evening, and he didn't want it to end yet.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Are you tired? Do you want to go home?"

"No, and yes," she answered.

"I don't understand." Ivan frowned, amused.

A conspiratorial smile crossed the young woman's face. "I'm not tired, but I would like to drive to my place. With you."

All of a sudden, Ivan's heart was racing. "Do you really want that?"

"Yes." That unusual, almost demanding glint in her eyes returned again. "Stay with me tonight. I'll drive you back to the clinic in the morning. They won't miss you for one night."

"Yes. I would love to come with you." He nodded, perhaps a little too enthusiastically for a grown man.

Ishy giggled. She had also noticed. "Then let's get going before I change my mind."

The light of the new morning was shining through the blinds in Ishy's bedroom when Ivan woke. He still felt overwhelmed by the night before, but it was a wonderful feeling.

He turned his head and looked at Ishy, who was lying next to him wearing only her underwear. She was on her side facing the other direction, the thin white sheet she used as a bedcover pulled up over her chest. The rays of light from the window fell across her long black hair, which flowed over the pillow like a waterfall, caressing the glowing skin on her back.

Ivan had to pull himself together to stop from reaching out to her. How he would have loved to touch her the way he had touched her the night before. But she was still asleep, and he didn't want to wake her.

He looked back up at the yellow painted ceiling and rubbed his left hand over his face. He still could not believe his luck. What a night!

Ishy had been an amazing lover, gentle and demanding at the same time, very different from the hectic Mandy Lane, who he'd had his first sexual experiences with in his last year of high school, or the rather vulgar ladies in the brothel where "the boys" in the army had dragged him before they went off to Afghanistan.

He was pleased to see that his body, despite aging, had not let him down. That would have been extremely embarrassing, to be in bed with a woman like Ishy only to find out that the spirit was willing but the flesh too weak. "No need to worry," Ishy had said to him later with a twinkle in her eye when he talked to her about it. "I have something here that would have helped. There are amazing medicines available over the counter nowadays."

The thought that Ishy had obviously made preparations for their night together brought a smile to his face. Carefully, so as not to wake her, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got up. He looked around for a t-shirt and, after he had quietly left the bedroom, pulled it over his head. Barefoot, he tiptoed through the living room with its open kitchen and stepped up to the north-facing panorama windows.

Ishy's apartment was right on the hillside of Grand View Park, also known as Turtle Hill to the people who lived there because of its shape. The window offered a phenomenal view of the Sunset District right up to Golden Gate Park and the Presidio behind it. He could see the two struts of the Golden Gate Bridge, tiny in the distance. And on the horizon, about eight miles away, the hills of Marin County rose up.

For a while, Ivan looked out of the window without saying a word. As he did so, he was thinking about how peaceful the world seemed when you looked at it from a certain distance.

"Did I chase you out of bed?" a woman's voice asked from behind him.

He took his eyes from the landscape and turned around. Ishy was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. She had casually thrown on a top and was trying to tame her loose hair with a hairband. Although she must have just woken up, she didn't seem to be the slightest bit drowsy.

"No. I just couldn't sleep anymore," Ivan answered. "The days in the clinic start very early. Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't," she assured him as she walked through the living room. "I'm also an early riser, or have you forgotten? What are you doing?" She walked over to him, confidently grabbed his strong arms, and snuggled up against him. Then she turned to look at the city panorama as well.

"I'm just looking out the window," he said. Her body still felt wonderfully warm from being in bed, and her hair had the light fragrance of jasmine in it. "My parents would have envied you for this view. Where we lived in Los Angeles, we could only see as far as the facade of the building on the other side of the street."

"I was lucky," Ishy only said. "I would never have gotten the apartment without the help of friends."

For a while, they stood together silently and watched the day dawn in San Francisco. Finally Ishy said, "I'll make us a coffee," and peeled herself out of his arms. "Do you want me to put some bread rolls in the oven? I'm afraid I've nothing else here."

"That's okay. I spent the last months of my life that I can remember in the military in Afghanistan. And then I was fed artificially for almost thirty years. Bread rolls warmed up in the oven sound like heaven on Earth."

"Yeah, you make fun of me," Ishy said. "I'll drive you to the clinic; there's probably porridge there for breakfast."

"And at all other meal times as well. Have mercy." He smiled, and she returned his smile.

Just a little later, they were sitting at the small breakfast table

they had pulled over to the window to enjoy the morning sun. Ivan ate two of the rolls with peanut butter. Ishy sipped only her coffee, silent as she did so. She was looking at him with such a strange expression that he had to ask, “What’s up? Everything okay?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I ask myself what comes next.”

“What do you mean?”

She tilted her head to one side. “With us. I regret nothing that’s happened, but…” She hesitated. “I also can’t just act as if it was nothing.”

Ivan placed his half-eaten roll on his plate. “Who says you have to?”

“No idea,” she said quietly. “You perhaps?” She looked at him. That look was in her eyes again, making her seem incredibly vulnerable.

Ivan finally understood what it was all about. She seemed to believe that it was only a one-night stand for him. “No,” he said, after a short pause. “No, what makes you think that? I… I’m happier than I’ve ever been. You’re the best thing that has happened to me in an eternity. And I would never… I would never have gone to bed with you if you didn’t really mean something to me.” He reached out across the table and took her hand. “Ishy, I want us to be together—not only today, but tomorrow and for as long as it lasts.”

“But we’ve only known each other a few days,” she said. “You know almost nothing about me. And suddenly I’m afraid that you’ll leave once you get to know me better.”

Ivan snorted. “That’s nonsense. I know you well enough. And everything I know about you shows that you’re a wonderful person. Do you have a murky past? Is that it? And even if you do, the past is over! I’ve left mine behind me. Only the future is important.”

Ishy lowered her head a little. “No, it’s not about my *past*.”

“What, then?” he asked insistently. “Talk to me.”

She took a deep breath and seemed to be collecting herself. Then she raised her eyes again and looked straight at him. “What I’m about to tell you is a secret. Very few people know it. But if we are to be together for longer, you’ll find out about it sooner or later anyway, and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea or find out the truth indirectly where it’s twisted in some way. But please promise me that you’ll keep it to yourself.”

Ivan had an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. What was he about to find out? “Okay, I promise. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“Ivan, I’m different from other people. I don’t know why, but I am. I was born with a special talent.”

“What do you mean?”

She hesitated. It obviously hadn’t been easy for her to admit this to him. “I can…see things. Things that are very distant. And I can also make these things visible to others. I can show you.” She stood up and went to the middle of the living room. She lifted her hands up to chest height. At the same time, she lifted her head a little. Her gaze seemed to focus on the distance, her eyes became glazed, the air between her hands flickered the way it does above an asphalt road surface on very hot days.

Ivan watched, paralyzed with fascination as the flickering became stronger and a picture emerged, at first deceptive and unclear like a fata morgana. But it became more stable with every second, and after about five seconds a picture was hanging there in the air between Ishy’s hands. It seemed to fade into nothing at the edges, but in the middle it was extremely clear.

It showed the viewing point on Mount Tamalpais, the place where they had met only a few days ago.

“Wow, not bad,” Ivan said. “How do you do that?”

Ishy’s gaze returned to the here and now. After she had created the picture, it seemed to cost her little effort to maintain it. “I only have to think of a certain place and concentrate on it. Then I can

conjure up the image."

"Does that mean you have to know the place?" he asked.

"No, I only have to imagine it. A photo or a very good description are also enough. Nevertheless, in such cases it is more difficult for me to create a picture. It's the same for places that are very far away. Mount Tamalpais is a very easy exercise. But if I wanted to conjure up Red Square in Moscow, that would be a lot more difficult."

"Not necessary. I have no connection to Great Russia."

"What about this?" Ishy asked. Her eyes glazed over again and the picture changed.

Ivan felt a shiver run down his spine. All of a sudden he was looking at his own room in the clinic. It was very tidy. His sports bag, which held his few possessions, was standing below the only table in the room.

"Hey, are you spying on me?" he asked, his tone a little sharper than intended.

Ishy let the image fade away and lowered her arms. "I knew you would say that," she said. "That's why I showed you the room. To show you what I am capable of before you start thinking about it and come to the wrong conclusion. But you have to believe me, I would never use my powers against your will. Not out of anger or out of jealousy, ever!" Her voice was shaking now, and her eyes became moist. "I made that mistake once when I was younger. Afterwards, I knew what I wanted to know, but the price I paid was losing my closest friendship at the time. That must never happen again, do you understand? Never with us." A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Ivan stood up and came towards her, took her in his arms, and comforted her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to be harsh. I was just surprised, that's all."

Ishy sniffed, then looked up at him and smiled. "Not as surprised

as I expected, to be honest."

"Well." He looked at her with a conspiratorial grin. "Perhaps it has to do with the fact that..."

He lifted his right hand, stared at a candle in a decorative silver candlestick on the dining room table, and snapped his fingers. The wick of the candle started burning with a light hiss.

"I too am not like others."

6.

The Beginning of the End

Kerlon's Bastion, Lannol

When humans regularly travel in outer space in the future, their ships will urgently need something like a personal, electronic Captain's log book, Rhodan thought, as he left his sleeping quarters that morning to go to the officer's mess on the *Tosoma X*.

A ship's captain would be able to dictate to a log book all the worries and problems he had to keep secret from the crew. That would help him to conceal any weaknesses he had that might have had a negative impact on morale. Speaking out loud about things that robbed him of sleep would have helped him to sort out his thoughts and find solutions.

This morning, his log book entry would have been as follows: "Personal log book of Perry Rhodan, more or less captain of the Arkonide recon ship *Tosoma X*. August 4, 2036. I basically see myself as a happy man. Destiny chose me to become a direct witness—no, more than that—the driving force behind what are perhaps the most radical upheavals in human history. Within two months, I became one of the first humans to meet extraterrestrials, and I have even been able to make friends with two of them, Crest and Thora."

The fact that he felt more than mere friendship for the proud Arkonide woman was something he probably would not have revealed in his log book. After all, he still didn't fully understand the way he felt.

When they first met on the Moon a good month ago, things were different. After they had returned to Earth, he had told his friend Reginald Bull—in a voice full of conviction—that he didn't have the slightest interest in the woman. Bull had teased Rhodan about falling for the "dreadful extraterrestrial Amazon." Reg, of course, didn't believe a word of his denial. Maybe his friend had had a

clearer view of the situation back then than he himself had today.

Rhodan sighed. Thora would certainly have been a good subject to discuss in a personal log book. But not now. There were other more pressing matters on his mind today.

“With the city of Terrania, I have laid the foundation for a new and unified Earth,” is how he would have continued his entry. “Thanks to an Arkonide ship, I have traveled to a solar system twenty-seven light years away, where I encountered two new interstellar peoples, the Ferrons and the Topsidans. You might be mistakenly thinking that I am living a dream.” At that moment, he would have paused meaningfully, perhaps even have sighed.

“And yet, sometimes I wish we had never met the Arkonide woman. We were already battling with envy, greed, the longing for power, and false patriotism on Earth. These human weaknesses have driven humanity to the brink of a world war. When we broadened our horizons and lifted our eyes towards space, I really hoped we would find something better there, something more noble. But what does reality look like? It’s just the same as at home. In the Vega system, two civilizations are doing battle. And Thora said that, in galacto-political terms, this was nothing but a meaningless local conflict! The Topsidans are merciless conquerors, the Ferrons offer unbending resistance. Where will it end? And more than anything else, what can I do to prevent the worst? I have nothing but a decrepit old Arkonide auxiliary craft, a handful of barely functioning robots, and five companions.”

The question of why he had even become involved in this war, which had nothing to do with him, was one that Rhodan would not have asked in the log book. That was more or less the only question he could answer without hesitation: because it was his moral duty. Just because he did not have the slightest notion of how he was going to end this war of the worlds did not mean he could close his eyes to the millions suffering as a result of it. Out there, far from Kerlon’s “Eternal Bastion,” that sad collection of caverns and passageways surrounding the underground hangar of the *Tosoma X*, a testimony to an Arkonide construction project that had fallen into ruin in the course of the millennia, was where Rhodan and his companions had now found refuge.

He entered the mess and was surprised to see Thora there as well. The Arkonide woman was eating something from the Bastion's supplies. At first glance, it looked like a military convenience product, but Rhodan couldn't believe the Arkonides produced edibles that lasted tens of thousands of years.

"Good morning," Thora greeted him. "Did you sleep well, dreaming of steam locomotives?" She said it with a blank expression, but her eyes could not hide the fact she was teasing him.

She's becoming more and more human, Rhodan thought to himself. "I wish I had," he replied. "Instead I spent the entire night hunting lizard-like monsters through swamps and deserts."

"And the other half?"

"I lay awake, thinking about what I need to do to stop the Topsidans from dominating my nightmares."

"You should try a few Arkonide relaxation exercises before you go to sleep. I could..." But she said no more, noticing that she was about to make an offer that wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind. "They probably don't work on humans anyway," she continued, a little more stiffly. "You don't have the necessary inner maturity."

"You're probably right," Rhodan agreed. He crossed the room to get something from the supplies of the *Tosoma X*. Before he reached the hatch, Ras Tschubai popped up right beside him, appearing out of nowhere.

The strong Sudanese man, who possessed the astounding talent of teleportation, seemed unusually excited. "Perry, come quickly! You have to see this!" He grabbed Rhodan's hand, looking over at Thora at the same moment. "You too, Thora," he said, offering her his left hand.

"What's up?" Rhodan asked as Thora put down her cutlery without a word and came over to join them. When it was important, Rhodan had already noticed she said nothing unnecessary and acted like a soldier.

“You’ll see in a second,” Tschubai answered before jumping with them.

They materialized in the control room. Wuriu Sengu and the two Ferrons, Chaktor and Lossoshér, were also present. The slightly rotund Asian man with the spiky hair had a grim look on his face, while the two aliens seemed frozen by fright and awe.

The reason for this soon became clear on a large holo screen in the middle of the control room. A man could be seen on it. It was difficult to tell how old he was. His skin was unusually light, smooth, and looked as if time had not affected it, but his eyes were full of a wisdom that suggested he was of a considerable age.

He was wearing a pair of simple gray pants, moccasins, and a brown shirt. On the outside he could only be described as undefinable—not like an individual, but more like the sum of an entire people. At the same time, his third eye, positioned right in the middle of his forehead, made him an unusual sight to see.

Rhodan felt himself shiver. “Is this man who I think he is?” he asked Chaktor.

His Ferron companion nodded bitterly. “He is the Thort. The Topsidans have captured him.”

That was obvious. The man was standing in shackles before the camera that was recording him. The chains were so tight that they forced him to stand slightly bent over, the aim of this being to rob him of his dignity in the eyes of his persecutors. Topsidan soldiers could be seen in the background, clearly guarding the prisoner.

“We are looking at a live transmission from the *Rugr-Krehn*, the Topsidans’ flagship,” Sengu explained. “The Topsidans are transmitting these pictures on all of the channels they have conquered, and on the pirate broadcasters as well, because they want to know what the Thort has to say. It is said he wants to announce the capitulation of the Ferrons.”

“Capitulation?” Thora repeated in disbelief. “But that’s—”

“Quiet, please,” Lossoshér interrupted her. The transmitter guardian pointed at the screen. “It’s beginning. Let’s listen to what the Thort has to say.”

“Ferron tribes,” the Thort said, beginning immediately. He had a pleasant, sonorous voice that revealed nothing of the pain the shackles must have been causing him. “I am turning to you now on a day in which the profoundest darkness rules and all the light seems to have been banished.”

He turned and looked resolutely into the camera with his third eye, his *seeing* eye, and no Topsidian shackles could do anything to diminish the sense of authority the man still emanated.

“We always knew we were not alone in the expanses of the universe. Our traditions have told us there is more out there than just cosmic dust and lonely fiery suns. There are countless worlds swimming in the stellar ocean, oases of life. Great and manifold are the varieties of creation. We ourselves are the children of this creation, and we always knew—no, hoped—that one day we would encounter others, wanderers between the stars, who would visit us and share their knowledge and histories with us.”

The Thort held his breath for a second. Rhodan used this as a chance to look at the others standing in the control center with him. Thora, standing next to him, looked highly concentrated, but there was also a certain look of disinterest in her expression. For the Arkonide woman, the Ferrons were just as uninteresting as the humans were. Of course she suffered with them, but only because she had been drawn directly into their war. If the Thort’s speech had been broadcast to her distant home planet on a news program about galactic events, she might have changed the channel.

Ras Tschubai and Wuriu Sengu were watching the speech with much more interest. Just like Rhodan, they were worried about their missing companions: Anne Sloane, Rod Nyssen, Conrad Deringhouse, Tako Kakuta, and Daria Morozova. And just like Rhodan, they were hoping to receive some sign that they were still alive every time they heard news about the war.

Chaktor and Lossoshér were glued to the screen, following every

word the Thort said. To them, he embodied the Ferron spirit; he was the measure of all things. His words were not merely the law, they were equal to a revelation. Whatever he said in the next few minutes would decide the future of the Vega system.

"And now it has happened," the Thort said. "We have met other intelligent beings from the expanse of space. But the Topsidans did not come as friends. They did not come as ambassadors with a stretched-out hand, welcoming us into a community of steller travelers. No, the Topsidans came over us like a plague! They took what belonged to us. They destroyed what we had built. All attempts to negotiate with them failed because reason means nothing to them. Our values and our dreams do not apply to them. They know only violence."

Rhodan's stomach was churning. *What was he intending to do?* Rhodan asked himself. *If that is a capitulation, then he is certainly making sure he sticks it to the Topsidans beforehand.*

He thought about the Topsidian guards. No doubt their officers were also listening to the Thort. How long would the lizard-like beings watch the defamatory speech without interfering? Or was that exactly what the Thort wanted? Did he want the Topsidans to execute him in front of the cameras as a grizzly climax to what had happened so far?

"Thousands and thousands have already lost their lives in this terrible war," the Thort continued. "Our worlds have been ravaged. Cities, villages, factories and fields are burning. Countless people have lost their homes, everything they own. What took generations to build is gone."

The Thort straightened a little. Rhodan saw the shackles dig into the skin of his wrists. "But one thing we have never lost, my brothers and sisters, my sons and daughters, is our dignity. The courage and the bravery of the Ferron tribes are unmatched. And then there is their willingness to sacrifice. Countless Ferrons have given their lives to stop the Topsidans. They did not give their lives laughing, but without any fear whatsoever, and in the knowledge that every man and woman who is fighting for their home is stronger than a hundred servants who only carry out the orders of

greedy masters."

The Thort's face remained without emotion, his voice calm and seemingly free of anger. But his eyes suddenly shone with a passion that was fascinating to watch. Rhodan noticed that everyone in the control center was now waiting breathlessly for the Thort's next words. It must have been the same for millions of Ferrons all over the Vega system.

"And yet..." The Thort lowered his head slightly and looked towards the ground. "All our efforts were in vain. The Toposidian technology is superior to ours. For every Topsidan we have killed, there are literally thousands of murdered Ferrons, which is why I believe the time has come to take a step that is even more courageous than fighting. We must pause and look inwards. Tribes of Ferron, I call upon you to lay down your weapons! For one day and one night. Think about who we are. Think about our traditions! Somebody brought light to us in our darkest hour. And that will happen again as it once did. We only have to believe strongly in that. And then..."

The Thort was silent. Rhodan saw him take a deep breath. The moment of truth had come.

Once again the Thort turned to the camera. The expression of unshakeable calm that had been on his face until now had been replaced by a grim determination. He looked into the lens, at both his people and tormentors, his eyes filled with cold fury.

"And then," he continued, "the Topsidans will pay for their actions. Our fury will blast over them like the fire from a dying star, and it will burn them—every single one of them. By everything that is sacred to us, we will—"

A glowing ray of energy flashed, and in the very same second, the transmission was over.

Astounded, Rhodan stared at the blueish-white static on the empty holo screen. They had actually done it. The Topsidans had killed the Thort. Before the eyes of his entire people.

It's the beginning of the end, he thought.

7.

The Golden Gate Bridge

San Francisco

August 4, 2036

"My goodness, what's going on here this morning?" Ishy looked at the stream of cars that were stuck in a jam before the entrance to the Presidio Parkway Tunnel. A red warning light was lit above the tunnel entrance, prohibiting any vehicles from entering.

"Maybe you should have allowed the on-board computer to take over. It would have avoided driving into the jam." Ivan pointed at the device integrated into the dashboard. He wasn't surprised by the fact that vehicles in the year 2036 could be steered completely by an autopilot. Experimental prototypes of this kind had already existed when he was young. What did surprise him, however, was the unwillingness of people to activate them.

"I usually would have done that," she replied, "if the transport ministry hadn't issued a notification two days ago that there have been navigation software outages in the western part of the United States because the Fantan have taken one of our EGPS satellites as *Besun*. And as you yourself can see..."

She touched the screen in the middle of her steering wheel, activating the car's front view display. The navigation system showed *No connection*.

"Does the car have an Evernet connection?" Ivan asked. "I could try to find out what's going on." He might have been in a coma for thirty years, but he learned fast.

"I do, but it's against the law to surf while driving, and there are too many police cars around, so I don't want to risk it. There's a tablet in the glove compartment. You can use it."

Ivan opened it and took out the mini computer, which looked like a very clear plexiglas rectangle in a polished white frame. He felt again as if he were in one of the science-fiction films he'd watched as a teenager. However, the plywood blocks that the actors had held in their hands back then seemed antiquated compared to contemporary communications technology.

He activated the tablet and searched the news channels for San Francisco. He had already figured out how to use the Evernet after being in the clinic for two days. His young spirit helped him with that, as it approached any unfamiliar technology intuitively and without any inner inhibitions.

He soon found what he was looking for. *Resistance increases among citizens as Golden Gate Bridge situation escalates*, was one of the morning's headlines. Ivan clicked on the associated video report.

"Like the past few days, many people gathered at the Golden Gate Bridge this morning. Thousands of citizens from San Francisco, but also from other parts of the city, have come together to occupy the city's famous landmark and defend it against the Fantan. The authorities have had to block the bridge entirely to traffic."

The newsreader's voice was accompanied by photos taken by news drones that showed a huge, colorful crowd of people sitting on all traffic lanes that crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. The camera picked up on people's headlights as they sat together talking, as well as young people playing music and vendors selling sausages or ice-cream. It looked to Ivan as if someone had spontaneously organized a street festival somewhere in the city, if not for the banners hung up on the steel struts of the bridge with slogans on them like, "You ain't getting me" and "Fantan, go home."

"Since the hovering ships of the Fantan had first appeared above the Golden Gate Bridge a few days ago, fear had grown among the citizens of San Francisco that the extraterrestrials were planning their boldest theft to date. Although the very idea seemed unimaginable, they knew only one thing about the Fantan so far—their greed knows no bounds!"

All of a sudden a pop-up announcement interrupted the news report: *Breaking news! Fantan attack Golden Gate Bridge!*

“Holy crap!” Ivan burst out. “Ishy, you have to see this! The Fantan are attacking the Golden Gate Bridge. How can I switch the report over to the front screen?”

“What?” Ishy gave him a shocked look. “Give it to me!” She took the tablet from him and quickly entered some commands.

A second later, a section of the windscreen turned into a monitor showing the live report. People were screaming and pointing at the sky. Some of them were crying, while many waved banners with angry slogans on them.

A middle-aged man could be seen in the foreground wearing a winter jacket with the MSNBC logo on it. His hair was tousled by the strong winds coming in from the sea. “...half a dozen of the Fantans’ so-called flounders have been seen. They are medium-sized models with a diameter of about thirty meters. They are still only circling the bridge, but their behavior makes it clear that they are up to something.”

A second image appeared next to the first one, obviously pictures taken by a drone. The remote-controlled observer flew a large curve around the Golden Gate Bridge, revealing the Fantan flounders circling San Francisco’s landmark. They reminded Ivan of a pack of hyenas surrounding an elephant that was weak with old age.

The camera zoomed in every now and again to focus on a guest standing next to the reporter. He had the slightly amused confidence of a man who knows more than everyone else does. “I am now talking to Doctor Dayton Ward, lecturer in engineering at UC Berkeley, who has been part of the Golden Gate Movement since day one. Doctor Ward, what is your opinion of the threat posed by the Fantan?”

“I don’t see it as a particularly serious one,” he answered. “Look around. The bridge is more than two thousand and seven hundred meters long, and almost thirty meters wide. Its pylons are almost two hundred and thirty meters high, and the entire structure weighs

eight hundred and eighty-seven tons. How are the Fantan supposed to carry it away? Even the tractor beams from all six ships together are, in our experience, not powerful enough to lift something that large and heavy. I have the feeling the eyes of the Fantan were bigger than their bellies this time, if that metaphor is adequate to..."

He suddenly stopped talking as a bright red light lit up his face. People could be heard screaming off camera.

Ward's eyes widened. "Holy Mother of God!"

The picture went fuzzy as the cameraman spun round.

About a dozen meters away, an energy beam as thick as an upper arm shot straight through the picture. With a deafening buzzing and sizzling sound, it ate its way through the asphalt on the roadway, easily cutting a path through folding chairs, picnic boxes, and human flesh.

Ivan watched in horror as the beam touched a white-haired man, who was immediately evaporated by the incredible heat. He burst like a balloon. The camera swayed as if the person holding it was trying not to faint.

"Oh God!" Ishy gagged in the passenger seat and quickly lifted a hand to her mouth. However, she managed to keep down her breakfast.

Cars stopped in the middle of the road to the left and right of them. Cries of horror could be heard from all over the place. Ishy and Ivan were not the only ones following the ghastly scene on the news. If the cars had not been driving at a snail's pace because of the traffic jam, there would no doubt have been a massive pile-up.

"What are you doing there?" the reporter screamed from off camera. "Oh my God, the Fantan are sawing the bridge apart. They *are sawing* the Golden Gate Bridge using energy beams."

The pictures from the drone delivered the merciless truth of his words. From a distance, they could clearly see that all six flounders had begun sawing through the bridge's supports with their laser

cutters and were dividing it up into several large pieces, each of which was about four hundred meters long.

The camera switched back to the reporter. His face was as white as chalk, but he was professional enough to continue. His guest, however, seemed to have fled.

"It's unbelievable!" the presenter screamed into the camera. "The Fantan attack has begun. As far as I can see, they are using high-powered lasers to cut up the Golden Gate Bridge like a loaf of bread. There's chaos everywhere!"

A loud bang that sounded like a gun going off made the reporter jump.

"People are trying to flee, but the laser cutters are blocking their way. I can see people from here jumping off the bridge in desperation. Others have pulled out guns and..."

There was another loud bang, followed by a rhythmic hammering that Ivan immediately recognized as machine gun fire. He asked himself how civilians had managed to smuggle the heavy weapons past the police cordons.

"They're *shooting!*" the reporter continued, now shouting above the background noise. "Some people are shooting at the Fantan. The government has asked people for moderation to date. The military has orders to watch but remain silent. But it seems like it has all become too much. These people are starting to fight back. They... Oh, crap, Chris, film over there! The guy in the motorcycle helmet!"

Once again the picture became fuzzy, then stabilized to focus on a man who was kneeling down alone in the midst of the remains of the interrupted bridge party. He was wearing a black leather outfit and a helmet with a mirrored visor, and he was openings a sports bag. He also had a flat, hard case rucksack on his back.

Next to Ivan, Ishy coughed in fright. "Miyagi!" she burst out.

Ivan didn't know if that was a Japanese swear word or if it meant she knew the man's name.

“What’s he pulling out of his bag?” the reporter asked. “It looks like a portable rocket launcher!”

“FGM-148 Javelin,” Ivan said. “Do they even still exist?” He recognized the anti-tank guided missile that had been commissioned forty years ago while he was on duty in Afghanistan.

The shooter seemed to be very familiar with the weapons system. Within seconds he had made all the necessary preparations, kneeled down on the ground, and hoisted the weapon onto his shoulder. Without noticing the camera pointed at him, he aimed at his target and fired.

The cameraman from MSNBC swung round and followed the rocket as it climbed steeply into the sky. When it had reached a height of about a hundred and fifty meters, it started to move along a curved path before crashing almost vertically downwards.

High attack, Ivan thought. Aiming high was one of the two possible ways to attack, the other one being a direct attack. The high attack was especially suited to targets with little protection on their upper side—or against objects shaped like a flying saucer.

The Fantan in their flounders didn’t even seem to realize what was coming when, a second later, the rocket hammered down on one of its ships from above. There was a thunderous explosion, and the Fantan ship dropped out of view of the camera. With smoke pouring out of it, it plunged towards the water beneath the bridge.

“A direct hit!” the reporter cheered. “I can’t believe it. Humanity has hit back against the Fantan for the first time. This man, whoever he may be, will be celebrated as a hero all over the globe tomorrow.”

As he talked, the shooter raced towards the edge of the bridge. A ruby-red energy beam burned into the asphalt behind him. Obviously, the Fantan were good at taking things off humans, but they were bad losers.

With a flowing movement based on many years of training, the man grabbed a hook from his belt that was attached to an elastic-

looking rope hanging out from the bottom of his backpack. Without pausing to take a breath, he slipped the hook over the railing, then jumped up onto the railing himself, and with his arms spread out like a cliff diver, he dove down into the deep.

“He’s crazy.” Ivan said, shaking his head in disbelief. “The guy is completely off his head.” His eyes moved towards the overhead perspective of the drone camera, which filmed the jump of the masked man all the way to the water;s surface.

Ivan felt as if he had been catapulted into an action movie when he saw the man activating some kind of mechanism just above the waves, throwing off his backpack, which was then hoisted back up into the air again.

At the same time, a blueish-gray speedboat shot over from the banks. While the Fantan’s flying-saucer-like hovership rotated on its own axis and red beams of energy made the water in San Francisco Bay boil, the person steering the speedboat killed the motor as he approached the jumper, and a second passenger pulled the swimmer on board. A split second later they were on their way again, speeding along the bay.

One of the Fantan flounders started chasing the attackers but suddenly turned around again. Before Ivan could even ask what the reason for that might be, Ishy gasped. She pointed through her car windscreen towards the eastern sky.

A spaceship was approaching from the Pacific Ocean. Initially, it looked a little fragile, but as it came closer, it was clear that the opposite was true. It was huge, of enormous dimensions. Anyone who had been watching the news over the past week knew what it was. It was the Fantan spindle ship, the eight-hundred-meter-long mother ship of the thieving extraterrestrials.

Ishy mumbled something in Japanese that sounded like a series of swear words.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Ivan asked as one jigsaw piece after another fell into place, coming together to create a terrible picture.

She nodded.

“Dear God!” the reporter on the Golden Gate Bridge exclaimed at exactly the same time, as the huge shadow fell over him and the people left on the bridge. “The Fantan mothership has arrived. They’re coming to fetch the bridge. I can’t believe it. Doctor Ward, where are you? Did you anticipate this?” He looked around searchingly, as if he had only just noticed that his interviewee was no longer there.

The reporter looked back towards the camera. “Chris, I think it’s time to get out of here. Things are getting dangerous. Come on. It’s only five hundred meters to the edge of the bridge.”

The two men ran off as the camera drone stayed fearlessly in place, documenting the giant metal body of the mothership taking up position over the bridge. Curious, the drone went closer. A second later the picture shook, and then all that could be seen was static. The reporter’s camera switched off at the same time.

Ivan watched the news operators switching to a second drone, then a third. But it was the same everywhere, with static on all channels.

“Signal interrupter,” Ivan commented. “The Fantan don’t want the entire world to see them stealing *Besun* live and watch hundreds of people losing their lives as a result.” He looked at Ishy. “Can’t you use your powers to create a picture of what’ll happen?”

Before she could answer, a metallic groaning sound reverberated across the bay towards them. When they turned their heads, they saw a part of the Golden Gate Bridge, which was being carried by a blue shimmering energy field, float upwards and disappear through a huge freight hatch into the belly of the spindle ship. Ivan believed he could see tiny dots falling from the bridge into the deep. He didn’t need a pair of binoculars to know that it wasn’t just folding chairs and picnic boxes. It was people! Ivan wondered whether the MSNBC reporter, Chris the cameraman, and Doctor Ward were among them.

Ishy buried her face in her hands. Her narrow shoulders were

shaking.

“I’m sorry,” Ivan said, comforting her by wrapping his arm around her. “Please forget I asked about your powers. We already know more than we want to.”

A ringing noise came from Ishy’s wrist. She took her hands from her face, sniffed, and wiped the tears from her eyes. Then she activated the cell phone with its earpiece in her ear and the rest fastened to her blouse, disguised as a brooch. “Ishy Matsu.”

Ivan didn’t know who she was talking to, but from they way her body tensed, he could tell it wasn’t merely a call from her sister wanting to gossip.

“I’m standing in front of the entrance to the Presidio Parkway Tunnel in a traffic jam,” she explained to the person on the other end. “Ivan Goratschin is with me. We saw everything.”

She said nothing for a second, then continued, “It was supposed to go differently, but I understand. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Ishy hung up. She let her head down on the steering wheel. Another Japanese swear word escaped her lips.

“What’s up?” Ivan wanted to know.

Ishy sighed and looked up. They were surrounded by cars in all directions across the parkway. The passengers and drivers had gotten out. Women had their hands over their mouths; men were swearing loudly and gesticulating. All of them were looking with disbelief towards the north, where the second section of the Golden Gate Bridge had just disappeared into the belly of the spindle ship.

“We have to get away from here,” Ishy said, opening the car door. “But we won’t be able to move anywhere by car for the next hour.”

“And that means?” Ivan asked as he followed her example and got out of the car.

“We’ll leave the car here and look for a taxi over there in the Presidio,” Ishy told him.

“You want to leave your car just standing here on the Parkway?”

She shrugged. “It’s not important anymore. If things continue this way, nothing will matter anymore. The Fantan will take everything we have.” She looked up at him. Her face was determined and hard all of a sudden. “If we let them.”

Ivan shook his head. “I don’t understand. Who was that on the telephone just now?”

“Friends of mine. You’ll meet them soon. We’re going to them now.”

“We?” Ivan asked. “Wait a moment. That’s not possible. I have to get back to the clinic. It’s already late as it is; I’ll be in trouble.”

“Forget the clinic!” Ishy burst out. “You don’t need the clinic anymore. You’re strong and healthy. You have powers. Please, come with me.” There was a pleading in her eyes that he couldn’t say no to. Not after what had happened between them last night.

“Okay,” Ivan said. “Let’s drive to your friends.”

8.

The False Arkonide

The Azore Island of São Miguel

August 3, 2036

"Are you ready, Crest?"

The elderly Arkonide looked at Dr. Haggard calmly from the stretcher. It was early afternoon. They were in a side wing of the clinic in Ponta Delgada, the capital city of the Azores on the island of São Miguel. Homer G. Adams had used his connections to get them access to the medical facilities. At the same time, he had made sure that the staff left them undisturbed. It was better if the doctors and nurses didn't get wind of the fact that they had a non-human patient in their midst.

Crest would have preferred to carry out the procedure in the Arkonide underwater dome. But that was, of course, not possible, as they didn't want the ancient Positronic to know that Crest was about to transform himself into the thousands-of-years-old ship's captain.

Even if medical technology on Earth was far behind that of the Arkonides, Crest now had enough experience to know that it was by no means as backward as he had believed when he first arrived on the planet. Apart from that, he would have followed Dr. Haggard anywhere, even if the procedure had to be carried out in an igloo at the North Pole. The Australian doctor had healed him from his immune disease, something that all the Arkonide technology had not been able to do, not least because none of the medically trained crew members from Crest's spaceship, the *Aetron*, had paid sufficient attention to the problem.

My new comrades are doubtlessly more enthusiastic about shaping the future than my former ones were, he thought. He nodded to the doctor. "I'm ready."

“Good.” Haggard smiled. “You don’t need to worry. While the procedure we are using is new, it passed all of its test runs with excellent results.” His smile disappeared, and he looked at Crest with a soft expression on his face. Crest realized it was the face he used to make his human patients trust him. “I’m going to give you an injection. With it, I will be injecting a virus which I have merged with the DNA we found. It is the first time I am merging Arkonide instead of human DNA, but as the genetic material of both our species is largely compatible, the process luckily went without complications.”

“And, as a result, I’ll be growing a second skin,” Crest added. Haggard had already explained the outline of his plan during their meeting that morning.

“Exactly. It is practically the same procedure we used to smuggle Rhodan into the USA when we wanted to take back the *Good Hope*. Within about eighteen hours, the virus will cause your body to generate a second layer of skin. This layer will display all characteristics of the genetic material we found. Therefore, when you return to the dome, the Positronic should identify you as the former commander of the complex.”

“And if it doesn’t, at least it won’t kill me right away, as it has obviously been ordered to accept all guests,” Crest remarked.

“Which is why we will be doing a test run in the dome,” Haggard confirmed. “If the procedure unexpectedly proves to have errors, I would rather know that before the *Tosoma’s* computer vaporizes you the way it did He Jian-Dong and his crew when they approached the wreck in their submarine.”

“Thank you for your caution.” Crest said, smiling.

Haggard lifted the needle, which had a pale red liquid in it. “As soon as I give you the injection, you will fall into a deep sleep while the virus does its work. Relax and don’t try to work against the effects.”

“I understand.” Crest took a deep breath in and out, then closed his eyes. “Go ahead.”

He felt the needle as it pierced the skin of his left arm. A moment of dizziness overcame him, and then he lost consciousness.

When Crest opened his eyes again, it felt as if no more than five minutes had passed. He was still lying on the same stretcher in the small room in the side wing of the clinic in Ponta Delgada. The sun was shining through the gaps in the blinds that covered the windows. Dr. Haggard was sitting next to him.

However, two things had changed. First, the doctor was wearing a blue shirt instead of a beige one. Secondly, Alan Mercant was sitting next to him and staring at Crest as if he were looking at a strange, unknown species.

Well, I actually am a strange, unknown species. At least here on Earth, Crest thought, not without a certain humor.

"It looks like I turned up at exactly the right moment," Mercant said. "Welcome back, Mr. Crest." If I may say so, you look as if you've been born again.

The elderly Arkonide sat up slowly. He didn't know what he looked like, but he certainly didn't feel a day younger. Even the twenty-four hours of sleep had not made him feel as rested as he'd expected. "Can you hand me a mirror?" he asked.

"Over here," Dr. Haggard said, pointing to a mirror on the wall above the washbasin. "Come, I'll help you get up."

He supported Crest, who sat up straight and got up from the stretcher. It was only then that Crest noticed the unpleasant sensation. It felt as if his entire skin had small insects crawling underneath it—all over his body.

"My skin feels strange," he said.

"Does it feel as if it's crawling?" Haggard asked. "That can happen. It's one of the side effects of the procedure. But it should go away in a few hours. It won't go away entirely, I'm afraid. The artificial second skin reacts with your normal skin. I'm working on how to avoid the irritation, but I still haven't found a solution for

it."

"It would be a small price to pay if I am able to gain access to the *Tosoma*," Crest said.

Mercant looked at him, his lips press tightly together. "All I can say is that I'm quite confident," he said. "Look at yourself in the mirror."

Crest stepped up to the mirror, and his heart started pounding faster. He looked like a young man!

Two hours later, however, he wished he had never signed up for this insane mission. He was surrounded by darkness, it was icy cold, and he was alone. The world three thousand meters below sea level was just as hostile as outer space, and Crest hated moving around in both of those environments, especially when he was protected by nothing but his Arkonide spacesuit.

Of course, he knew that as long as nothing totally unexpected happened, he was safe in the suit. Just as safe as he was in his seat in the control center of the *Aetron*. The reinforced multi-purpose suit with its own independent drive system may have come from the inventory of the dome with the aim of making Crest's disguise even more believable, but it was in excellent condition. Even ancient Arkon technology would have no problem operating at the bottom of the sea.

After Crest had woken up, he'd been feeling a little stronger. Mercant and Haggard had brought him out onto the ocean in one of the humans' submarines. While they assumed the underwater dome's Positronic did not monitor more than its immediate surroundings, they did not want to take any risks.

That was why they had brought Crest out to an area about a hundred kilometers south of the dome. And now he was making his way back in its direction, all alone and without radio contact.

The drive of his spacesuit hummed quietly as it steered him through the water, with the lamp on his helmet creating a diffuse beam of yellow light in the darkness. Particles floating in the water

glittered in the light, and every now and again small fish darted past him. Apart from that, he was surrounded by nothing. Crest was completely alone.

He suddenly realized that the depths of the ocean were even more unsettling than outer space. When you were floating in space, tiny and confronted with the endless panorama of the universe, you naturally felt small and insignificant. But the magnificence of the sea of stars before you also had something wondrous about it. Being out there in the expanse of space was almost a religious experience.

Here in the depths of the ocean, there was no feeling of expansiveness. All you had was profound darkness. He could not see more than a hundred meters around him. And even then, he could only see in the direction the beam of light on his helmet was pointing in. Next to him and behind him, there was nothing but darkness. Hundreds of millions of cubic kilometers of water surrounded him, possibly full of dangers he couldn't imagine. And he wouldn't even see them coming until, all of a sudden, a huge mouth full of teeth opened up before him or strong tentacles wrapped around his legs.

Stay calm, he told himself. *It's natural to feel uneasy in such an environment. There's nothing in these waters that could pose a real threat to somebody wearing an Arkonide protective suit. Apart from that, its sensors will warn me long before anything can attack me*.

He nodded silently to himself and called himself a fool. Nevertheless, he wished the old spacesuit had a system that was able to create a virtual display of his surroundings using the data from its sensors, just like the new Arkonide suits did. That way, the emptiness all around him could have been rendered more pleasant through a simulation displayed by the helmet.

"We are approaching our destination," the Positronic announced. It was a very rudimentary computer system compared to the ones Crest was used to working with. "Three kilometers until we reach the dome."

"Reduce speed!" Crest ordered. "Send an automatic detection signal. Do not open any voice channels."

"Understood."

The illuminated form of the deep-sea dome appeared before him. Several of the humans' submarines were circling it. Mercant and the others had decided not to evacuate before Crest's arrival, as that would have been too conspicuous.

Crest switched off the lamp on his helmet and all systems that weren't absolutely vital. They had agreed he would approach the dome very carefully, as the dome's Positronic was no doubt monitoring his arrival. The crew of the submarine had been ordered to ignore him. The "stranger" returning home was to first of all contact only the dome's Positronic and convince it that he was the master of the complex.

It was a crazy plan and there was no guarantee it would work. And yet, the fear that Crest had felt thus far was replaced by a feeling of nervous excitement, now that he was about to reach his destination. "I can't actually believe I'm doing this," he murmured.

"Excuse me, but I didn't understand the last command," the spacesuit's Positronic said.

"I wasn't talking to you," Crest said.

He didn't know he had it in him to be so courageous. Spending a lot of time with humans seemed to have had an unusual effect on him. It revived character traits he thought had been dead and buried for a long time. Ancient feelings that were suddenly coming back to him. It felt to him like the first step towards the immortality he had been seeking for so long.

"We have received an answer from the dome's Positronic, " the suit announced. "It has granted us permission to board."

On the helmet's display, Crest could see the airlock, which—hidden until now—was starting to open on the wall of the dome. He steered the suit towards it and slid slowly inside. The airlock closed behind him. He heard a hissing sound as air was pressed into the narrow chamber, pushing out the seawater.

A warning light switched on, signalizing that the process had been successfully completed. Crest pressed a button on his spacesuit, pulling the helmet upwards, and it folded back down into the collar. The air smelled damp and salty, and water was dripping down the walls.

"Welcome Commander!" the dome's Positronic said, greeting him as the inside hatch opened, allowing Crest to look into one of the complex's corridors. "I didn't think you would ever return."

The Arkonide scientist had to control his urge to start cheering the way the humans did. Their plan appeared to be working!

He put on a serious expression befitting the occasion. "What made you think I wouldn't come back?"

"The last thing you said before you left was that your time here was over," the Positronic answered.

"Things sometimes change," Crest answered. "Apart from that, you know what organic beings are like—both fickle and fallible."

"Of course."

Crest looked around. The corridor was empty on both sides. He was in a part of the dome the humans had not yet taken over. The Positronic assumed that the commander would not want to be confronted with other beings who were not purebred Arkonides.

"What condition is the complex in?" Crest asked as he slowly peeled off the spacesuit in a bid to gain some time.

Obediently, the Positronic gave him a report. As Crest already knew from his own observations, there was damage everywhere, even to the on-board computer. The dome had been designed to be in operation for months, decades at most, but not several thousand years.

"Apart from that, a number of beings who are not purebred Arkonides have been in the dome since yesterday. According to my current parameters, they are not dangerous. Therefore, I have left them alone."

Crest nodded. That information was of course not new to him. “Understood. The parameters shall remain as they are. I will take care of our guests.” In the meantime, he had removed the suit completely. He stepped up to a control panel mounted on the wall of the corridor. “But before I do that, I want to have a look at the log data.”

“That’s not possible,” the Positronic announced.

Frowning, Crest lifted his head. He knew that the circuit boards of the computer were integrated into the walls and floors. Despite that, he made the same mistake that most people did by looking at the ceiling when talking to the Positronic.

“Why can I not see the log data?” he asked. “I am your master!” This was the moment of truth. The moment he would find out whether his disguise had been a complete success or not.

“Yes, you are,” the Positronic confirmed. “And you personally ordered me to destroy the log data before you left. You wanted nobody to have access to them. Have you forgotten that?”

It was a question Crest was unable to answer for a second or two.

9.

Desperate Plans

Kerlon's Bastion, Lannol

"And then the Topsidans will pay for their actions. Our fury will blast over them like the fire from a dying star, and it will burn them—every single one of them. By everything that is sacred to us, we will..." A glowing ray of energy flashed and, in the very same second, the transmission was over.

Rhodan shook his head, but he could not rid himself of the image repeating in his mind's eye like a ghostly echo of the holo transmission. For a few seconds, everything was deathly silent in the control center of the *Tosoma X*.

Lossoshér was the first to speak. "They've killed the Thort...," he whispered in a gravelly voice.

His voice sounded hoarse and brittle, as if the elderly guardian of the transmitter had aged more than ten years since his grim realization of what he had witnessed.

Rhodan pressed his lips together. He would have liked to have said something to comfort the elderly Ferron, but the words wouldn't come.

Instead, Chaktor spoke. "These evil *Felltar*!" he shouted. His face darkened the way the sky does when a storm is brewing. The stocky man clenched his fists. In a powerless gesture of pain, he lifted them and hammered them back down onto the table the holo emitter was standing on. His voice became louder. "These *Sanri-Felltar*! The've murdered the Thort. Slaughtered him. Before the eyes of his entire people!"

He turned to Rhodan, as if he expected an immediate reaction from the man he believed to be the Ferrons' savior. His face was filled with anger and desperation. "Did you see that? Did you see

what the Topsidans did? They must die! Every last one of them must die a painful death. I will tear out their intestines if it's the last thing I do in life."

Rhodan lifted his hands in a gesture he hoped would soothe Chaktor. "Calm down. Getting upset isn't helping anyone."

"But I am upset!" Chaktor screamed. Normally, he would never have spoken to Rhodan in that way, but his pain from losing the Thort overcame him. "Don't you understand what the Topsidans have done? It's not simply a matter of murdering the chief of a tribe or a minister. They have killed *the Thort*. First, they took him prisoner, then they tried to humiliate him, and now they have shot him. An outrage of this kind is without precedence in the history of our people. The Thort stands above all things. His life is sacred. He is all-seeing. He leads us by example."

"And if need be, also into death," Lossoshér said in a dark voice. "The lizards will discover that soon enough. If they believe the Ferron people will be broken by this cowardly murder, they are greatly mistaken. We will allow the *Laifah* to descend upon them, and they will pay a thousand times for their crimes."

Oh, this is going to be fun, Rhodan thought. Now he not only had to deal with unbending freedom fighters, but also relentless fanatics. *Hopefully they will come to their senses before they lead to their own extinction in an uprising against the Topsidans.*

"Perry, look here," Ras Tschubai said, pointing at the holo screen, which had come back to life.

It looked as if the Sudanese man had managed to find a Ferron pirate channel, and images were coming in from all over the Vega system. They basically all showed the same thing. The Ferrons were withdrawing from their battles with the Topsidans. Images of partisan fighters reached them from Pigalle, retreating into the swamps and the jungle to hide themselves from the enemy. On Reyan, men and women jumped into waiting submarines, which they then steered into the dark depths of the ocean that covered the entire planet. Shaky pictures from Rofus showed long lines of Ferrons who were obviously on their way to the remote mountain

valleys.

None of the Ferrons laid down their weapons. Nobody surrendered. Instead, they all obeyed the last command of the Thort to pause and let their weapons fall silent for one day and one night, to prepare mentally for the last great attack, the last uprising.

It looked as if the Topsidans were extremely surprised by this mass withdrawal. Some of their units started to pursue the Ferrons, while others stopped fighting and waited for new orders. The war in the Vega system had to come to a sudden standstill.

When Chaktor saw the images, he became very quiet. The young Ferron looked over to Lossoshér, and the elderly guardian of the transmitter nodded silently to him. The mutual dislike they normally openly demonstrated seemed to be forgotten in the face of this catastrophe. If the Topsidans had achieved one thing through their actions, it was to unify the Ferron people—from the youngest child to the oldest man.

Chaktor turned to Rhodan. “If you permit it, Lossoshér and I will now withdraw. We want to respect the Thort’s last words by retreating and praying. If you need us, we’ll be in my quarters.”

“Of course,” Rhodan said, “If anything happens, we’ll come and get you,”

He watched as the two men left the control unit before exchanging glances with his remaining companions. He did not see relief in any of their faces. If anything, they seemed to be even more worried than before.

“This is only postponing things,” Tschubai said. “In one day and one night according to Ferrol time, we will no doubt witness the demise of the Ferrons unless we figure out beforehand what we can do to prevent it.”

“But what can we do?” Wuriu asked. The plump young Japanese man leaned against the control panel. He seemed depressed. “We don’t have a single auxiliary craft that is capable of flight at the moment. In the basement of the Bastion is a transmitter that may

bring us to Rofus, but maybe not. Apart from that, we have a huge room full of mummified Arkonides on offer. And there are only four of us."

"There are six of us," Rhodan said. "We mustn't forget Lossoshér and Chaktor. And there were only nine of us when we decided to enter this battle between the Ferrons and Topsidans—to do something to put an end to the conflict."

"Okay, but what have we even achieved so far?" Wuriu wanted to know. "The *Good Hope* crashed on Ferrol. We lost Rod, and Alexander, Conrad, Tako, and Anne have disappeared, maybe even are dead. The Topsidans shot the Thort, and Ferrons all over the system are on the run. We have contributed *nothing* to settling this conflict, never mind ending it. All we have done is react, fight for survival, and flee."

"You're wrong, Wuriu," Tchubai said. "Yes, it's true that we've been merely surviving so far, running from Ferrol to Rofus, and right here to Lannol. But we did a lot of good things along the way. We've saved the lives of numerous Ferrons. Lossoshér and Chaktor are only two of them."

"And you mustn't forget that we've only been here a few days," Thora said, unexpectedly coming to Tschubai's aid. The Arkonide woman looked at Wuriu with a disapproving expression. The kind of look a teacher would give a student who would rather give up on a difficult exercise than pull himself together and work at it. "In that short time, we have learned a great deal about the conflict. No plan can be victorious if the necessary reconnaissance work hasn't been done first."

It seemed as though she wanted to say something more, but she closed her mouth and remained silent.

The transmitter, Rhodan thought. *Finding that alone is worth a lot of the trouble we've had.* He intentionally avoided thinking about everyone, because the loss of human life could never be compensated with the discovery of the mysterious machine. He passionately hoped their other lost companions were still alive.

“Okay,” Wuriu admitted. “So, we’ve saved a few Ferrons, and we’ve managed to get an idea of what’s going on here. But that changes nothing about the fact that we are literally stuck in this bastion and time is running out. What should we do?”

“Couldn’t we try to sneak onto a Topsidian ship?” Tschubai suggested. “Nobody would even notice us in one of those things. We could link up to the hyper radio equipment and call your people for help, Thora.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Sengu asked. “Do you want to teleport right in there? Don’t you think that’s a little beyond our range?”

“Well, we could somehow try to get the attention of the Topsidans,” Tschubai said. “For example, sending out a radio message that would raise their curiosity. If they came looking with an auxiliary craft to see what’s going on, we could teleport on board and have them take us back as stowaways.”

Thora shook her head. “That wouldn’t help us. I don’t think I would be able to convince somebody from the Great Empire to interfere in this conflict. Why should the Arkonides support the Ferrons?”

“Aren’t all new allies a good thing?” Tschubai asked.

The Arkonide woman gave him a pitiful smile. “I’m afraid you have misjudged reality, Mr. Tschubai. Having the Topsidans as an enemy would be very annoying for the Empire, and having the friendship of the Ferrons could not make up for that.”

Tschubai frowned. “I thought the Topsidian technology was far inferior to yours?”

“It is. Which is why having the Topsidans as enemies would be annoying, not dangerous. However, the Vega system…” Thora hesitated briefly. “The Vega system has nothing to offer the Empire that would justify an intervention. That’s why I won’t be sending out a call for help.”

Rhodan had the distinct feeling that Thora wasn't telling them the entire truth. At the same time, he did share her opinion concerning the willingness of the Arkonides to fight for the Ferrons. The Arkonides he had met were not even willing to help their own comrades who were in distress on a planet less than three hundred thousand kilometers away.

Wuriu ran a hand through his black spiky hair. "What about a commando operation? Like the one that Perry, Chaktor, and I undertook in the desert fort on Rofus when we rescued Thora? We are a pretty efficient team. We have you as a teleporter, Ras, me as a scanner, and Thora knows how to operate extraterrestrial technology. Lossoshér knows all about transmitters, and Chaktor is a wild fighter."

"And what about him?" Thora asked, glancing at Rhodan with a complacent look on her face.

Sengu realized he had forgotten to mention Perry in his list. He turned red. "We..." he stammered, "Perry's our leader, isn't he? That doesn't need to be said. You understand what I mean, don't you, Perry?"

"Saved by the skin of your teeth." Tschubai grinned.

"It's okay," Rhodan said, trying to calm the young man.

"What role would I play in a commando operation?" Thora asked, turning the conversation back to the topic at hand.

"I thought we might manage to find our way to Topsidan leader," Wuriu explained. "If we can kidnap him, we'll have a bargaining chip in our hands that might help us curb the invasion."

"And how do you expect us to find this leader?" Tschubai replied. "It's not as if we can just ask where he is."

"That's true." Wuriu pursed his lips and thought it over. Then he suddenly snapped his fingers. "I know. We can listen in on the Topsidans' radio transmissions. The auxiliary craft should be capable of that. Alternatively, with Chaktor's help, we can contact

one of the Ferron partisan groups that run a pirate channel and have them help us. Once we know where the guy we're looking for is hanging out, we can find a way to get to him and take him prisoner. After all, we have powers the Topsidans can do nothing against."

"You mean apart from thick steel walls and energy shields," Thora interjected. "Don't forget the Topsidian flagship is of Arkonide origin. You can't simply walk in there and back out again."

"That's why we've got you on our team," Wuriu said. "You can take care of the finer aspects of infiltrating an Arkonide battleship."

Thora sighed and shook her head. "It's a nice idea, but even if we managed to overcome the Topsidan leader, I don't know if that would be of any use to us. While I was imprisoned, I was able to find out a little about how the lizards think. Their society has a strong hierarchical structure. If we knock off its head, it will just be replaced. Whatever it is the Topsidans are looking for here in the Vega system, they won't stop just because we threaten to murder one of them. And I don't believe you would be able to kill someone anyway." She gave him a disparaging look, making the young man suddenly feel very small

"Okay, then maybe we should fly back to Earth," he said meekly, "and see what's been happening there in the meantime. Perhaps they need us there more urgently than they do here. And even if not, Mercant and Adams might have an ace up their sleeves that could help us to come back stronger."

Rhodan, who had listened to the others so far, now spoke up. "No," he said emphatically. "We are not flying back. You heard Ellert. We can't give up. We have to look forward with courage, even if we believe there is no hope." He stared at the holo screen, which was still showing scenes of Ferrons fleeing and Topsidans pursuing them. "I don't believe that military violence is the solution here. We should try to find another way."

"What do you mean?" Wuriu asked.

“We have to use our brains.” Rhodan smiled. “Go and get Lossoshér and Chaktor. And then I’ll tell you what we’re going to do.”

It was a crazy, maybe even desperate, plan that was forming in his head. But it was the only one that promised any kind of success.

10.

On a Knife's Edge

Ferrol's Orbit, in the Vega System

Somehow Trker-Hon already knew what was going to happen before it did. And yet he could not stop things from taking their course.

The Topsidan Wise One was in the central communications hub of the Rugr-Krehn, the stolen Arkonide battleship that acted as the backbone of their invasion fleet. He was with Genkt-Tarm, the new Supreme Commander of the Vega Expedition Armed Forces, and some of his officers. The imprisoned stranger, Ensloun, was also there. They all listened to the Thort's announcement, which he was delivering to his people in front of a holo recorder.

Trker-Hon observed the man closely. He looked extremely calm, completely without fear. The fact that he was bound in chains and threatened by armed soldiers did not seem to disturb the leader of the Ferrons. In fact, these attempts to demonstrate his inferiority seemed to only strengthen his resolve.

The Wise One listened to the Thort's words as he spoke of the dreams the Ferrons had of encountering people from other stars and the disappointment that, of all peoples, it was the Topsidans who had come. Enemies and invaders.

He is strong, the Wise One realized at that moment. *Stronger than we thought. Genkt-Tarm is wrong if he believes this man has been broken by threats. This is not over.*

As if wanting to prove Trker-Hon wrong, the Thort lowered his head, a gesture of resignation. "And yet..." the Ferron man was saying, the third eye on his forehead looking subdued. "All our efforts were in vain. The Topsidian technology is superior to ours. For every Topsidan we have killed and kill, there are literally thousands of murdered Ferrons."

Am I mistaken? the Wise One asked himself. But his feelings told him he was not.

"Which is why I believe the time has come to take a step that is even more courageous than fighting. We must pause and look inwards. Tribes of Ferron, I call upon you to lay down your weapons! For one day and one night. Think about who we are. Think about our traditions! Somebody brought light to us in our darkest hour. And that will happen again as it once did. We only have to believe strongly in that. And then..."

The Thort was silent.

Trker-Hon felt his gut twist. He could not prevent a shiver from running through his tail. The eleventh sentence of the Social Directive came to mind. *Here is here. Now is now. Bundle your energies. There is no hereafter.*

The Thort also seemed to know this, because as he lifted his head again, there was a determination in his eyes that knew no tomorrow. The Ferron looked straight at the camera, at the same time looking beyond and above it at Genkt-Tarm and his officers.

I knew it. The Wise One was now certain. *He won't surrender!*

"And then," the Ferron continued in a tone of voice that promised calamity.

He has exactly the opposite in mind. A last rebellion, the death of a martyr calling his people to wage an endless war. Trker-Hon looked over at Genkt-Tarm. The Supreme Commander seemed to have come to the same conclusion. However, he obviously wasn't thinking of the consequences as his hand wandered down to the holster on his hip carrying his thermo beamer.

No, no, no! Trker-Hon wanted to scream, but no words came out.

"Then," the Thort was saying, "the Topsidans will pay for their actions."

Everything happened all at once.

“Our fury will blast over them like the fire from a dying star, and it will burn them—every single one of them.”

Genkt-Tarm’s face was twisted with hatred. He grabbed the thermo beamer from its holster and aimed it at the Ferron.

The officers and guards jumped up. Ensloun raised her arms. Trker-Hon lunged towards his Supreme Commander to stop him. But he was too late.

“By everything that is sacred to us,” the Thort’s voice thundered, “we will—”

Genkt-Tarm squeezed.

A glowing ray of energy flared up. It burst through the holo recorder, causing sparks to fly everywhere, and then moved towards the Thort. But it didn’t hit him. It missed the Thort by a hair’s width, instead striking a control panel on the back wall of the communication hub.

There was shouting everywhere. The soldiers raised their weapons, the officers drew theirs. Ensloun pushed her guards aside and jumped forward, directly between the Thort and Genkt-Tarm. At the same time, Trker-Hon grabbed his superior’s arm and pushed it down.

Genkt-Tarm rounded on him. His small, black eyes glinted with fury. “What are you doing? Have you gone off your head?”

“No, I want to help you,” Trker-Hon said quickly.

“I don’t need your help to kill an enemy.” The Supreme Commander brusquely shook off the Wise One. Again he aimed the thermo beamer at the Thort—or rather at the strange woman who had placed herself before him. “Get out of the way, Ensloun,” he ordered. “Or do you want to die?”

“No, I don’t,” she replied without moving an inch. “But if you want to kill him, you’ll have to kill me first.”

The Supreme Commander acknowledged her words but showed

no emotion. “It’s your life. If you want to throw it away, that’s your decision. But before I shoot you both, I have one last question.” He stared straight at the Thort with an expression, Trker-Hon thought, showed not only anger, but also genuine curiosity.

“What do you want?” the Thort asked. He was completely calm. Death had no power over him.

Trker-Hon thought of the first sentence of the Social Directive. *The higher makes sense of the lower. The senseless degrades the high. The highest of everything is wholeness.* The thought suddenly and involuntarily came to him that the Thort was the quintessence of the higher, because he not only gave his people direction and purpose, he seemed more than anything else to emanate a serene wholeness. If that was true, then his death really was a crime because it made no sense and was therefore a lowly act.

Trker-Hon asked himself how the scholars at home interpreted this directive.

While he was thinking, Genkt-Tarm stepped towards the woman and the Ferron. “I would like to know why you did that. Why did you incite your people to rise up against us? You are the Thort! It is your job to ensure the welfare of your people! And you know as well as I do that they cannot conquer us. If they fight against us, we will kill them for as long as it takes, until nobody is left.”

The Thort looked at him calmly. The anger that had flashed in his eyes only moments before was completely gone. It seemed to have burned itself out during his speech to his people. Now that he was facing certain death, he was once again at peace with himself. “None of us wants to die,” he said to the Supreme Commander. “But life is not the most valuable thing. Dignity is! Before we live without dignity, we would rather face death with dignity.”

Genkt-Tarm stared at him without emotion. Trker-Hon knew that other creatures often found the motionless facial expressions of the Topsidans unsettling. But the Thort was not intimidated by this. His face was also immobile.

He has something of a Topsidan about him, if only in that respect,

the Wise One realized to his surprise

It was Genkt-Tarm who broke the silence. “Your words do not make sense,” he said. “*Respect life. Preserve it where you can. Only destroy it where it is unavoidable*. That is the third sentence of the Social Directive.”

“Then follow it!” the Thort said. “Spare our lives. End this invasion and return with your fleet to where you came from.”

“I cannot do that. I have my orders.”

“And what exactly are these orders?” Ensloun asked angrily. Until now she had stood there silently. “What do the Topsidans want from the Ferrons, in their eyes an inferior people? You can hardly be interested in their technology. And you will be able to obtain raw materials far more easily and with much less pain in uninhabited systems.”

Genkt-Tarm looked at her for a second, his eyes cold. “I am neither authorized nor do I feel the need to inform you of the plans of the Despotate of the 7022nd double year. My orders are to take over the system, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

The Thort tilted his head to the side, saddened. “Then you leave us no choice.”

“We do!” Genkt-Tarm hissed. “We let your people have a choice day after day. Why do they not give up? Resistance is useless. The sooner you surrender, the less violence will be needed.”

“You do not understand us,” the Thort said with a sense of ultimacy in his voice, as if this was going to be his last word on the matter.

Genkt-Tarm seemed to think enough had been said. “No, you are the one who does not understand. And you will never understand. You are useless.” He lifted his thermal beamer once again. The brave but stupid Ensloun moved into the line of fire. The muzzle of the weapon was pointing straight at her chest.

Trker-Hon could tangibly feel the tension in the room tighten.

The soldiers and officers were waiting for the speaking to finally stop and for something to happen. *Waiting blinds you, hesitation blurs everything. Only your acts can explain you*. The fourth sentence of the Social Directive.

It was so obvious that the Wise One needed a second to understand he had assigned this saying to the wrong person. It was not Genkt-Tarm who was supposed to act. It was he, Trker-Hon, who needed to follow the Directive.

"Wait!" he called out.

To his relief, the Supreme Commander immediately did what he said. He looked towards the Wise One with a question, but also reluctance, in his eyes.

Trker-Hon lifted his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "You'll be making a great mistake if you kill this woman and this man. You mustn't do it!"

Genkt-Tarm's eyes became even icier. "Chren-Tork!" he said, turning to one of the ship's officers. "Take all your men and leave us alone for a moment!"

"Should I not leave a few guards in the room?"

"Immediately!" Genkt-Tarm barked.

The officer winced, saluted obediently, and hurriedly obeyed the order. While he and his men withdrew from the communication hub, the Supreme Commander casually activated his personal protective shield using the generator on his belt. A transparent field of energy folded itself around him, making him look a little blurred.

After the hatch in the room had closed behind the soldiers, Genkt-Tarm turned to Trker- Hon. "I did not want the officers to see this here. For your sake." He looked at the Thort and the woman from the side of his eyes. "One wrong move and I'll shoot." To emphasize his words, he lifted the thermal beamer.

The Thort seemed almost amused. "Don't worry, Commander," he replied. "I can hardly make any right moves in these shackles,

never mind any wrong ones."

Ensloun lifted her hands defensively. "I think I'd like to live a little longer."

"I'm glad to hear that," Genkt-Tarm said. He turned towards the Wise One again and took a step in his direction.

Trying to assess the situation, Trker-Hon stuck his forked tongue out a little. He could clearly taste the man's irritability.

"First of all," the Supreme Commander said in a dangerously low voice. "I forbid anyone to tell me what I have to do—or not do. As the Wise One, you are a respected member of this expedition. But you have a purely advisory role to play. Nothing more. Is that clear?"

Trker-Hon nodded respectfully. "Of course, Genkt-Tarm. I ask for your forgiveness. I was careless in my choice of words. But please understand that it was a result of this dire situation, of the need to act fast. I'm merely trying to prevent you from making mistakes that you may later regret."

"Explain yourself!" the Commander demanded. They were speaking so quietly now that the prisoners—or rather their translation devices—could no longer understand what was being said.

"You heard the Thort's speech. His last words were a call to battle. After that, you shot out the recording device. For everyone watching, it must have looked as if you shot the Thort in response to his rousing words."

"Then for his people, he is already dead, so it will do no harm to actually kill him. And don't start quoting the third sentence of the Social Directive to me. The Thort has thrown away his life with his own conduct. If I do not punish him severely, I would be a weakling in the eyes of the officers. And as a Wise One, you are certainly aware of the second sentence of the Social Directive."

Strengthen the strong. Whoever strengthens the weak, weakens the

entirety. Of course Trker-Hon knew it. And he understood that he would have to choose his next words very carefully. Because it was not only the lives of the prisoners, but also Genkt-Tarm's authority that was hanging in the balance.

"Perhaps there is a chance for you to turn your act of mercy into a strategic master stroke," the Wise One said. "The situation is as follows. The Thort has incited his people to engage in endless war. I have come to know the Ferrons a little, and so I know they will follow his words because his words are equal to a sacred law in their eyes. We have better weapons, and we'll conquer them in every battle. But there are billions of Ferrons out there. It will lead us into a war of attrition that will cost untold mortalities on both sides. Apart from that..."

Trker-Hon lowered his voice even more.

"Apart from that, we both know that we did not come to this system to destroy it completely."

It was a long shot, but the Wise One had already guessed there was more to this invasion than the Supreme Command had been telling them. He had his own theory about it all, and now seemed to be the moment to test it. If he was right, he held a powerful trump card in his hand.

Genkt-Tarm's eyes flared for a second. The Supreme Commander obviously knew what Trker-Hon was talking about.

Let's see how far I can push this, he thought to himself. "We have a mission," he continued. "The Despotate thought the easiest way to go about fulfilling it would be to conquer the Vega system and then turn to deal with the real task at hand. But that strategy hasn't worked. It will cost us an endless amount of effort to successfully complete the expedition if we are constantly being hindered by attackers who are willing to sacrifice themselves to kill us."

"I'm still waiting for your solution to the problem," the Supreme Commander hissed at him. "Please tell me where this conversation is going."

The Wise One nodded. “Of course. Right away. The solution is...” He hesitated, looking for the right word. “An unusual one, at least for us. But perhaps worth a try in this case. I would like to suggest that we stop trying to subjugate the Ferrons and instead negotiate with them.”

“Negotiate? Like the members of some merchant’s guild?” Genkt-Tarm snorted at him derogatorily. “You sound as if you’ve spent too much time with Ensloun.”

“Nevertheless, in my opinion, it’s worth thinking about. We have already tried the ultimate threat—to devastate all of the planets in the system. But that strategy has failed. If we continue to pursue our current course, we will have only one choice, and that is to transform the entire Vega system into a collection of dead worlds. We would, of course, conquer the Ferrons, but it would not be a victory. We would have gained nothing, only lost. Think about what I have said, Genkt-Tarm. Use the Directives as guidance. The course we are currently on cannot be the goal. And it is also not the goal of the Despotate. We have the chance to transform this unfortunate situation into a success if we can convince the Thort to negotiate. Negotiate hard, as is befitting of a soldier, but also concede just enough to give him the chance to accept our demands. Once we have pulled him over to our side, we can present him—resurrected—to his people, and have him order them to lay down their weapons.”

When Trker-Hon was finished, Genkt-Tarm said nothing for a few seconds. He simply stared at the Wise One. However, he didn’t seem to see him, his gaze directed inward. He was obviously thinking things over.

Maybe my words have made him reconsider, the Wise One thought hopefully.

Suddenly, Genkt-Tarm turned towards the hatch. “Guards!” he shouted.

The entrance opened immediately, and several soldiers rushed in.

“Take these two prisoners to the cells!” he said, pointing at the Thort and Ensloun. “I’m not finished with them yet.” He turned back to face Trker-Hon. “And take this man away too!”

The Wise One’s widened in surprise.

“There may be wisdom in your words, Trker-Hon, and I will consider them,” the Supreme Commander said calmly. “But irrespective of that, you attacked the Supreme Commander of the fleet. Such behavior cannot go unpunished. You will be locked up like the others. I will decide what to do with you in due time.”

11.

Flames of Resistance

San Francisco, August 4, 2036

"Here we are."

Ishy stopped her car in front of an inconspicuous-looking factory in an industrial area in the south of San Francisco. Ivan didn't know exactly where they were. When he was a young kid, this area east of Skyline Boulevard had still been the green hills of the Milagra Ridge County Parks.

A rust-colored door opened on a side wall of the factory building. A man came out. He was large and heavily built with a square chin and short haircut, military style. Ivan estimated him to be in his mid-thirties. *He's either a professional sportsman or a soldier*, he thought, asking himself what Ishy was doing hanging out with a guy like that.

The man looked quickly from side to side, as if expecting the enemy to arrive at any moment. Then he waved to Ishy. Ivan was even more surprised when the other guy put his arms around her and they greeted each other in fluent Japanese.

"Speak English, Artyom—," she said to him, "Or Russian if you really have to." With a quick and seemingly involuntary gesture, she removed herself from his hug.

"Who's that?" Ivan asked, turning to Ishy.

The guy looked at Ivan, sizing him up. His expression was hard, but in his eyes there was a certain spark indicating that he cared about Ishy. That spark disappeared a second later.

"My name is Artyom Tomisenkov," he said in a Russian accent, holding out his hand. Ivan took it. His handshake was so strong that it almost felt hostile.

“Ivan Goratschin,” Ivan said, introducing himself. *Russian mafia*? he asked himself.

“I know who you are,” Artyom interrupted. “Ishy’s told us quite a bit about you. Come on in! We don’t have much time.” He disappeared into of the building.

“What’s going on?” Ivan whispered to Ishy, as he followed her in.

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” she answered quietly.

They went down a short corridor. There were doors to the left and right, no doubt leading to offices. At the end of the hall was another metal door that led into a giant factory space. There had no doubt been machines there at some point, but apart from a few concrete blocks on the floor, there was nothing left of them.

But what was being hidden in the factory space was even more fantastic. Ivan’s eyes widened.

“Is this supposed to be a joke?” he asked. “That’s a Fantan flounder!”

“Well done, Mr. Goratschin,” said a man kneeling on the saucer-shaped body of the ship, which had a diameter of about twenty meters. There was a toolbox next to him, and a maintenance hatch was open, providing access to the ship’s interior.

The man set his spanner to one side, stood up, jumped the one and a half meters down to the factory floor, and walked towards them. He was of average build with thinning, dark blonde hair and a disarming smile.

“Master Sergeant Andrew Miles, United States Air Force, currently off duty. Happy to meet you.”

Ivan shook his hand. “Um, the pleasure’s all mine. So, tell me, how on Earth did this monster get here?”

“Wasn’t that hard,” Miles said. “About five day ago, this thing landed in a farmyard in Oregon. Its pilot tried to steal the farmer’s

favorite cow. The man was so angry, he fetched his old shotgun from the house, resulting in the extraterrestrial getting blasted with a round right between those funny dark holes that seem to be their eyes. Afterwards, the farmer called me. He happens to be my old man."

"That answers only half my question."

"That's when we turned up," a new voice, which had said nothing so far, chimed in. The accent told Ivan the speaker was also Russian.

When Ivan turned round, he saw a slim man whose fashionable jacket—and the mirrored sunglasses he had hooked into the collar of his shirt—made him look every inch the boss of a criminal gang, just as Artyom looked like a thug. He was accompanied by a wiry man in a black leather outfit. To Ivan's surprise, he recognized him as the man who had fired the rocket launcher at the Golden Gate Bridge. He had taken this helmet off, so Ivan was able to see that he was of Asian descent.

"As chance would have it, we were doing surveillance on the Fantan activities, when we happened upon this flounder," the Russian man continued. "Of course, we contacted Mr. Miles Senior immediately. When we met him in person, we were able to convince him of our cause. And then his son decided to join us. It was him who flew the flounder all along the coastline from Oregon to San Francisco."

"You?" Ivan said, looking at him in disbelief.

"I might not look like it at the moment," he said, "but just like Artyom, I was a cosmonaut in the Greater Russian space program just two months ago." The man offered Ivan his hand. "I'm the leader of this little operation."

"And what kind of operation is it? What exactly are you up to?" Ivan was now extremely confused. Obviously, these friends of Ishy were responsible for shooting down the flounder in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. And now this? Had he landed in the middle of a pocket of resistance fighters?

Ishy laid her hand on his arm. “Ivan, my friends and I belong to a group that is part of a larger worldwide movement of people who do not agree with our governments only looking on as the Fantan ravage the planet.”

“We found each other by accident, like all the others did,” Raskuyan continued, obviously wanting to take over the conversation from there. “We still don’t have any joint procedures, but thanks to Evernet, we’re networking with together better every day. We are idealists and realists. We would like to believe in Perry Rhodan’s vision of a unified Earth and of humanity venturing into outer space—but not at any price. What the Fantan are doing here is wrong. Worse than that, it’s criminal. Especially since that horrific attack on the Golden Gate Bridge, which now makes it a case of mass murder! Their hunt for *Besun* is making them lose control. That’s why we can no longer allow them to go unpunished. There must—”

The door was suddenly flung open, and a young blonde woman came rushing in. Ivan didn’t know her. She had military binoculars in her left hand. “The Fantan are coming!” she cried out excitedly. “There’s a flounder on its way here right now.” She immediately had everyone’s undivided attention.

“That’s not possible, Justine,” Tomisenkov said. “They can’t have followed us. We managed to shake them off in our speedboat before Treasure Island.”

“I’m telling you, it’s true!” the blonde woman insisted. “Come up to the roof if you don’t believe me.”

Raskuyan’s lips narrowed to a thin line. “Then they’ve obviously been able to trace the flounder. We have to get out of here immediately if we don’t want to lose it.”

“We won’t be able to get a kilometer from here with the other Fantan flounder so close by,” Miles said. “You might be a good pilot, Step, but these guys have had years of experience.”

“So we need a diversion,” the Asian man said. “We still have a rocket launcher. I’ll take it and shoot the flounder down. That will

alert other ships, but by the time they're here you'll be long gone, and I'll have gone underground."

"No, Miyagi!" Ishy replied. "That's insane."

The man grinned. "Acts of insanity are my specialty, as you know."

"Then I'm staying with you," the blonde woman said.

Miyagi made a dismissive gesture. "It's too dangerous."

"I don't care," the woman insisted. "You need someone to cover your back. Apart from that, you might be Mr. Cool when it comes to doing crazy stunts, but you're new in the city and I grew up here. If you want to shoot down two flounders in one day, the Fantan will hunt you as if you were the Devil in person. I can help you to disappear and go so deep underground in the city that they'll take weeks to find us."

Miyagi didn't seem happy with the suggestion, despite her arguments in its favor. "No, I—"

"Discussion over!" Raskuyan interrupted. "We don't have time for arguing. Miyagi, Justine, you make sure our friends get a fiery welcome and then get to safety right away. We'll disappear with the flounder. We'll make contact via the usual channels in six hours. Good luck!"

As Miyagi and Justine rushed out of the room, Raskuyan, Miles, and Tomisenkov hurried to the parked Fantan ship. Ishy grabbed Ivan's hand and pulled him behind her. He did not protest.

His thoughts were racing. The events of the last few hours had overwhelmed him. But there was no time to think about it now. First of all, they had to survive.

Miles pressed one of the sensor pads that was hidden in the shell of the ship. This lowered an access ramp between the telescopic legs of the flounder. They all rushed into the saucer-shaped craft.

As Ivan soon found out, the flounder consisted mainly of a small

windowless cockpit that offered enough space for four people. Otherwise, there was a great deal of cargo space, but there didn't seem to be anything like a machine room. All of the drive segments appeared to be accessible from the outside.

The cockpit had already been adapted to human needs by adding some Earthly equipment. At least Ivan didn't think that the Fantan, with their cylindrical bodies, usually sat on sports seats that had been removed from American Corvettes and screwed into the floor with a great deal of brute force. There were notes stuck to the various elements on the control panel, and in two places cables were hanging out of the wall, linked up to human computers.

"We don't understand nearly enough of what this aircraft is capable of," Raskuyan explained as he let himself drop down into the sports seat and clicked his safety belt into place. But at least it flies, and we don't feel sick every time we get feedback from the steering controls."

Ivan didn't have a clue what the cosmonaut was talking about, but as long as the man knew what he was doing, everything was fine.

Miles and Tomisenkov sat down on two of the remaining three seats.

"We're missing one place," the Master Sergeant commented.

"It doesn't matter," Ishy quickly replied, "Ivan and I will share one."

The petite woman looked at Ivan, a question in her eyes. He nodded, quickly jumped into the last chair, and allowed Ishy to take a seat on his lap. She clasped her belt shut, and he laid his arms around her. For a moment he wished they were back in her bedroom.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tomisenkov looking at him with a grim expression. *Were they together at one point?* Ivan asked himself. *Or is he perhaps just jealous because I dared to approach Ishy in a way he never had the courage to?* Ultimately, it didn't matter. He

only hoped that the Russian man didn't make the mistake of getting on his nerves.

At several places in the cockpit, transparencies hung from the ceiling on thin threads. Someone had attached roughly soldered metal frames to them so that they didn't swing around. The transparencies came alive, showing images from the inside of the factory space.

"Hold tight, everyone!" Miles shouted. "We're lifting off the ground." He entered some commands into the computer and then suddenly pulled a remote control out of his overall pocket, placing it in front of him.

Ivan heard a rumbling sound coming from concealed speakers, and one of the transparency screens showed a huge gate opening in the south wall of the factory.

"Let's hope Miyagi is successful," Tomisenkov said. "Otherwise, this'll be the shortest flight of our lives."

Shaking, the flounder lifted slightly into the air. Raskuyan and Tomisenkov seemed to have to steer the craft together in order to simulate the six extremities of the Fantan. But it worked, and the aircraft tipped gently forward and slid out of the building.

While Miles monitored the technical processes, Ishy kept her eye on the images being fed in by the external cameras. "Miyagi and Justine are on the roof," she reported as the flounder climbed into the air between the factory buildings. "They've got the rocket launcher with them. The Fantan have almost reached them."

Ivan followed everything happening on the screen, fascinated, as Miyagi lifted a second antitank guided missile of the type FGM-148 Javelin and took aim. He was impressed by the man's boldness.

With a hissing sound, the rocket shot out of the gun towards the attacker. In the very same second, Miyagi threw away the weapon and sprinted towards the door to the stairway, where Justine was waiting for him.

He was too slow.

Faster than the blink of an eye, the Fantan flounder fired an energy beam at the rocket. The laser hit it with terrifying accuracy, and it exploded less than ten meters from the edge of the factory roof. The blast threw Miyagi and Justine to the floor. A moment later, the Asian man was wrapped in blueish light coming from the body of the Fantan flounder.

“Oh my God, Stepan, they’ve got Miyagi!” Ishy called out. “They’re pulling him on board using a tractor beam. We have to do something.”

“We can’t help him,” Raskuyan replied grimly. “We don’t know how to operate the cutting laser or the tractor beam projector in this machine.”

Below them, on the roof, Justine was screaming in desperation. She threw herself forward and grabbed Miyagi’s hands with the intention of holding on to him. The tractor beam simply lifted her along with him. Miyagi shouted something to her, but they couldn’t make out his words through the loudspeaker. Justine shook her head. Her face showed fury and desperation at the same time.

But Miyagi got his way. He twisted his hands out of her grip, and she fell three meters onto the gravel surface of the roof. She remained lying there, motionless.

Ishy turned her head. “Ivan, do something! Use your powers!”

“Too late,” Raskuyan said. “We’re out of here.” He activated a few of the exotic-looking steering panels, and the image behind them immediately became much smaller as the flounder accelerated and shot across the bay eastwards towards the hinterland.

“Do the Fantan take prisoners?” Tomisenkov asked. “Or is he just *Besun* to them?” His voice sounded bitter.

Ishy, still sitting in Ivan’s arms, breathed in and out heavily a few times. Then she lifted a hand and wiped her cheeks with the back of it. Ivan didn’t have to see her face to know that she was

silently crying.

Do something! Her voice echoed through his head. *Use your powers!* The knowledge that he really could have helped hit Ivan like a punch in the gut. Over the past few days, he had completely suppressed any thoughts of his destructive power to set things alight. And yet he had engulfed an entire spaceship in roaring flames, making it tumble to Earth. A flounder shouldn't be a problem for him.

He closed his eyes. *Why did I have to wake up in a world being attacked by extraterrestrials?* he asked himself. *Why can't I just live a simple life...with Ishy?*

He heard Miles curse behind him. "So much for our successful escape. We've got a Fantan flounder on our tail."

"Is it the same one that got Miyagi?" Raskuyan wanted to know.

"Sorry, I'm not completely sure. I was distracted by the instruments for a second. As far as size is concerned, that could be it."

"Artyom, give me more thrust!" Raskuyan ordered. "We have to shake it off."

The second cosmonaut obeyed, and the landscape beneath them began to blur as the flounder took off at breakneck speed. Within minutes they were flying at a height of about two hundred meters over the cities of Hayward, Livermore, and Modesto. The sonic boom must have been deafening.

The Sierra Nevada mountains appeared before them. The snow-capped peaks were shining in the midday sun. Normally, Ivan would have marveled at the phenomenal views. Now, however, he only had eyes for the view out the back of the aircraft, where he could see their pursuers slowly but surely getting closer.

"Humans," a tinny-sounding voice said through the cockpit loudspeakers. "Land immediately and give us back our property! We will not hurt you."

“And what about Miyagi?” Ishy screamed with unconcealed anger. “What have you done with him?”

“They can’t hear you,” Raskuyan told her. “We don’t know how to work the flounder’s radio system.”

“Humans,” their pursuers repeated. “Land immediately and give us back our property! Otherwise, we will have to kill you. That is not what we want. But we will act if you force us to.”

A ruby-red energy beam flashed on their port side. The Fantan had hit them with a warning shot.

“Damn! Why can’t we retaliate?” Miles swore. His hands were flying across the computer keyboard as he tried to make the Fantan ship grant them access to its secondary systems.

The dry desertland of Nevada swept past below them. In the distance, Ivan could already see the towers of Las Vegas reaching into the air.

“We’re going down,” Raskuyan decided. “Maybe we can shake them off in the mountains.” He was referring to the Rocky Mountains, which stretched before them to the east.

“That’s far too dangerous,” Miles objected. “Without the autopilot, we’ll crash into a cliff. We’re flying at almost Mach three!”

“Do you have a better idea?” the Russian shouted at him.

Again, the energy beam flashed past them, this time a little closer. “Humans,” the voice droned from the loudspeakers. “You leave us no choice. We must destroy our property and kill you. That makes us very sad, believe us.”

Ishy grabbed Ivan’s hand. “Ivan,” she whispered urgently, “you can save us. Please do something!”

That’s what he had been afraid of. Worse still, he had seen it coming. The moment Ishy had entered the secret hideaway of the resistance fighters, he had known he was about to allow himself to

be drawn into a war. He had simply not wanted to admit it to himself.

The war against the Fantan was not his war. They had done nothing to him. But, of course, he was whitewashing the situation on Earth. He was closing his eyes to the immense suffering the alien plunderers had brought to humanity.

And now, here he was, at a turning point. Every step he took from here on out led to a future with no turning back. If he acted, he would become a soldier again, a past life that he wanted to leave behind him. But if he didn't act and refused to make use of his enormous powers, everyone here would die.

A few days ago, he might have welcomed that idea. He was a bitter man, lonely, robbed of thirty years of his life. But now he had something worth fighting for! Or rather, someone. The woman he held in his arms.

"Raskuyan, land!" Ivan said, determination in his voice.

"Are you insane, Goratschin?" the Russian answered. "We can't let the Fantan have the flounder. The resistance movement needs it."

"We'll give them nothing," Ivan said, trying to calm him. "But I can only rescue us if I can see my enemy."

"Trust him, Stepan," Ishy interrupted. "He's one of us now."

Something in her words sounded strange to Ivan, but he didn't have any time to ponder that now as Raskuyan had nodded and was slowing the aircraft. The pilot set the flounder down on a rugged mountain top. They could not have been more exposed to the enemy if they tried.

"If they shoot now, we're toast," Tomisenkov growled.

"They won't shoot," Ishy assured him. "The Fantan think we're surrendering. Look, they're coming." She pointed at one of the screens, which showed their pursuers hovering ever closer.

Ishy undid her seatbelt and stood up. Ivan did the same.

“The rest of you stay in here,” he said, “to be on the safe side.” *This is something I have to do alone,* he added in his head.

“No,” Ishy replied. “I‘m coming with you.” Her eyes spoke volumes. She knew how much he was struggling with his inner demons. And she knew he was only doing this for her.

Ivan took her hand briefly and squeezed it. “Stay behind me!” he ordered. Then he nodded at Miles, who lowered the ramp to let them out.

Ivan stepped outside. A warm wind blew around him, and the sun was burning in the sky. He immediately felt like he had been given a role in a western, like the ones his father had loved to watch. A man at the end of a dusty road, his Colt sitting loosely in its holster, his nemesis approaching him from the front.

Ivan’s nemesis hovered closer with screeching propulsion jets. Dust was whirled upward as the Fantan move in to land.

“Now, Ivan,” Ishy said.

Ivan clenched his hands. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. He couldn’t have said who he was apologizing to. To Miyagi, who was possibly imprisoned on the Fantan ship? To the Fantan, who perhaps didn’t understand why the people reacted to them with so much hatred? Or to himself because he was simply unable to escape his fate?

He concentrated and felt the glow of heat rise within him. He accepted it, strengthened it, and directed all his power at the gleaming saucer that hovered less than two hundred meters from where he was standing.

In the next second, there was a bang, and the aircraft was suddenly on fire. The flounder was engulfed by roaring and crackling as his powers forced its atoms to react, causing a nuclear fire. Then it slipped away and crashed down the mountainside into the valley below. It hit the bottom with unimaginable force less than a kilometer below where Ivan stood. The blast that came when the drive exploded nearly threw him off his feet.

And then there was nothing left except for a charred wreck in the middle of a sizable crater. Their pursuers were history. Ivan had killed them, burned them alive.

“Let’s go,” he murmured flatly. He looked at his watch. It was exactly twelve noon.

Six hours later, they had traveled halfway around the world. They had to dodge two Fantan patrols, but they managed to do so without Ivan having to use his powers again until they landed in an extinct crater on a tiny island in the Atlantic.

Raskuyan maintained it was Corvo, the most northwesterly and smallest island of the Azores. He could have told Ivan anything. As far as Ivan was concerned, it was a green rock surrounded by an endless expanse of water.

It was a good hiding place to take a break, stretch their legs, and see if their extraterrestrial aircraft needed any repairs. While Raskuyan, Miles, and Tomisenkov took care of the machine, Ivan

and Ishy climbed the upward-sloping meadow to the northern edge of the crater so that they could have some time alone.

Ivan sucked in the salty sea air, which had the fragrance of wild grasses mixed in with it. It was so peaceful here. He wished he could just stay here forever. But, of course, that was impossible. He had opened a door and crossed a threshold. And there was no going back.

With a sigh, he sat down in the grass and looked out at the waves. “I ask myself where this is all going to end.” he said, sounding depressed. “Why can’t the Fantan just disappear again? Surely, they must have enough at some point.”

Ishy sat down next to him and looked at him with sympathy in her eyes. “I’m afraid it’s not as simple as that. You saw it with your own eyes. One spindle ship disappeared, and another appeared almost immediately. Earth is like a banquet to them, and they think they can just help themselves to anything they want. They’ll never stop unless the food becomes too costly.”

“You’re talking about resistance.”

Ishy nodded. “It’s becoming stronger every day. People are rising up everywhere. But we are at a dangerous juncture. Will the Fantan take revenge on the resistance fighters, using brutal violence against them? Or will they leave? The coming days will decide that.”

Ivan found the idea of a global war gut-wrenching. “I asked myself what’s wrong with Perry Rhodan,” he said. “He’s the one who made contact with the Arkonides. Why can’t he also reach an agreement with the Fantan?”

“Damn it, Ivan!” Ishy said. Her eyes sparked with anger. “Stop hiding yourself behind something else. First, it was the clinic. Now it’s Rhodan. Since the Fantan landed, nobody has set eyes on him again. Maybe he’s dead. Maybe he was kidnapped. Or maybe he’s just a coward, hiding away somewhere. Whatever the case, Rhodan is not here to help us. We have to take responsibility for our own future. *You* must take responsibility, Ivan!”

“What am I supposed to do? I’m only one man!”

Ishy’s voice lowered to an urgent whisper. “One man with unusual powers. Powers the Fantan can only dream of. You could beat them. You’ve already proven that.“

Ivan’s feeling of nausea got worse. “Ishy, what are you trying to say?”

She looked at him calmly. Her facial expression was somber. “I think you know, Ivan. Stop doubting yourself. Decide who you want to be. Take the leap, just like you did the first time we met and you gave yourself permission to love me.”

She stood up. “I’m going to help Stepan and Artyom with the repairs and give you time to think.

12.

Say Hello to the Stars for Me

The Solar System

August 4, 2036

They were deep within Mercury's orbit, a mere ten million kilometers from the sun. Only a handful of humanity's space probes had ever made it this close to Earth's star.

The temperatures and radiation levels outside of the recon craft were fatal. But on the inside of the small spaceship, protected by its energy shield and the super-insulated exterior shell, they sat as safe as if they had been nestled in an armchair at home in front of the fireplace. At least, that's how it felt to Julian. Maybe Harno was to blame for the fact that he almost felt cozy facing the tempestuous ball of fire and that he felt no fear whatsoever.

After Timothy had discovered the strange globe of sparkling light in the interior of the crashed Arkonide spaceship, things had gone very fast. Mildred and Julian's argument had reached a point where it was better to stop speaking before they said something they might later regret. As such, Julian had been very grateful for the diversion that Timothy and his new friend had offered them.

Timothy had very quickly told them about Harno's fate, and about the offer the creature had made to help them with the problems currently facing the world. Following that, Julian had used the opportunity to end his argument with Mildred. Helping Harno to solve his problem and, in return, having this extremely strange being helping them, really was a win-win situation. And that would ultimately make stealing the recon craft not such a senseless act after all.

The flight from Titan to the Sun had taken about five hours, flying at about a quarter of the speed of light. Julian made the same suggestion he had on the flight to Titan, saying they should try and use the time to rest. And it was true, all three of them really did

need a good sleep.

But it wasn't to be. Mildred had spent two hours fidgeting in the copilot's seat that Timothy had kindly offered her so that she could rest. For almost the entire time, Timothy had stared continuously at Harno floating in the middle of the recon craft's dome. And Julian was kept awake by the worried thought that the Fantan might find them again.

He couldn't shake off that fear, despite the cozy fireplace atmosphere in the cockpit. They were practically hanging in space, immobile. This was good on the one hand because it reduced their energy profile, making it more difficult for the Fantan to discover them. On the other hand, it also meant they were more or less sitting ducks if the extraterrestrials managed to slip past Mildred, who was keeping an eye on the tracking screen, and attacked them out of the blue.

Julian looked over at his girlfriend. She had tied her long black hair into a loose knot at the back of her head so that it wasn't in her way. Her dark eyes were concentrated on the tracking screen. And yet, even though she looked like she was paying attention. it was obvious she was exhausted. Both the bags under her eyes and her slightly pinched facial expression were evidence of that.

"Do you want me to relieve you?" he asked.

Mildred blinked and rubbed her eyes. "I'm okay," she said. "It would be better if you kept your eye on our glowing visitor."

Julian looked over his shoulder. Harno had moved up to the apex of the cockpit dome and was just hanging there motionless in the air. He had already been floating there for a good four hours, not moving at all—like a ceiling lamp, albeit a very strange one. Different color patterns slipped across his surface, so one could at least assume he was still alive. Whatever that might mean in his case.

Next to and below Harno, Timothy was perched on the emergency seat. The eyes of the dreamy young man were literally glued to their guest from a faraway galaxy. Julian had the

impression that his friend was completely fascinated by Harno. He asked himself what the two of them had talked about before Timothy had come to get him and Mildred.

Julian turned back to his girlfriend. “I think Tim is keeping a keen eye on our glowing friend for us. To be honest, it seems like he’s having difficulty keeping his eyes off him for a second.”

“I heard that,” Timothy called from the back

Julian sighed. “Listen to me, Timmyboy,” he said as he turned back again. “I find this Harno pretty incredible as well.”

Which was actually true, although Julian had to admit that his ability for finding things fascinating had suffered a little from the unbelievable events of the past week. The arrival of the Arkonides had been a wake-up call for him, as if humanity had finally arrived in the future. Like in one in the science-fiction series he had watched as a child. The Fantan had shaken him because they were so utterly strange. And now there was Harno…undoubtedly the most exotic life form that he had encountered so far, but also the most obscure.

“But,” he continued, “don’t you think you’re overdoing it a bit? You worship that creature.”

“I do not *worship* it,” Timothy argued. He seemed a little insulted. But then that wistful glint came back into his eyes. “I’m…envious of Harno. I would so much like to be like him, completely free, floating in space, able to fly wherever I wanted. Without distance or time, no matter how long, restricting me in any way.”

“He doesn’t seem particularly free to me,” Mildred said. “Harno was obviously trapped in the Arkonide spaceship.”

Timothy shrugged. “That was an unfortunate accident, but I doubt Harno will make the same mistake again. Although…who knows? He seems to be filled with a boundless curiosity. And the universe is the playground where he satisfies that curiosity. I wonder about all the things he’s seen and experienced.”

“I hope he’s experienced something that makes him able to help us,” Julian growled. He looked up at Harno and then at his watch. “Apart from that, I hope his sunbathing session is over soon. The Fantan will not have forgotten that we managed to escape them in the recon craft. If we’re unlucky, patrols might be searching the solar system at this very minute. I’m not very keen on seeing them again, I can tell you.”

“He said it wouldn’t take long before he regenerated,” Timothy said in Harno’s defense.

Julian gave him a crooked grin. “I’m not sure whether a being that has just spent ten thousand years in a wrecked spaceship without suffering anything more than a slight feeling of hunger has an idea of what ‘not long’ means. We’ve already been here for four hours.”

Mildred let out an expletive that wasn’t very ladylike. “We’ve got a problem, boys,” she said. “I have two Fantan flounders on our tracking screen. They’re still at the edges of our sensor range, but that’s already far too close for my taste. We should disappear from here as fast as we can.”

The fascinating play of colors on Harno’s spherical body started to pulsate. *Wait*, a voice in Timothy’s head suddenly said.

A surprised gasp escaped Julian’s lips. “That’s Harno,” Timothy told him and Mildred. “He communicates telepathically.”

Please, give me just a little more time, the illuminated being said. *It will take only a few more minutes to sate my hunger. Then I can continue my journey. If we turn away now, it will all have been in vain. I need a critical energy level to complete the transformation.*

“What transformation?” Julian wanted to know, his hands hovering over the controls.

The transformation into my traveling form, which I need in order to withstand all the adversities in space, Harno explained.

“Maybe we should just switch off all systems,” Timothy

suggested. “Then the Fantan will presumably not be able to see us.”

“Have you taken a look at the top of the dome?” Julian argued. “Our friend Harno is radiating so strongly, he looks like a beacon.”

Timothy shook his head. “We are located right in front of the sun. Its radiation and light will conceal us.”

“Computer, could that work?” Julian asked.

“I cannot answer that question,” the Positronic replied. “The life form named Harno radiates a very unusual range of the electromagnetic spectrum. It is not known whether the Fantan scanners are explicitly set to detect this range. If they are, they would find Harno immediately. If not, then he is presumably invisible to them.”

“Oh, great!” Julian moaned. “All or nothing.”

“What about the strength of the Fantan flounder’s energy shield, Computer?” Timothy asked. “Could we outmaneuver them by flying a little closer to the Sun?”

“No,” the computer answered, this time with sobering firmness. “The energy shields of the Arkonide recon craft are weaker than those of the Fantan patrol ships.”

“Damn!” Julian turned back to the controls. “There must be something we can do.”

“Whatever we do, it’s time we make a decision,” Mildred said, “I’m afraid the Fantan have discovered us. They’re coming closer and in such a straight line that it can’t be a coincidence.”

Julian whirled round in his seat and stared up at Harno. “What about the help you promised us? Now would be the right time.”

Be patient, human! I will help you. The pulsating lights on Harno’s surface became faster.

In the distance, a ruby-red, focused bundle of energy rays flashed past the recon craft. The message was clear. The Fantan wanted

them to stay exactly where they were.

“I don’t have time to be patient,” Julian said excitedly. “We have to get away from here, otherwise…”

A moment later, he winced as the recon craft cockpit was suddenly lit up by a brightly glowing light. For one terrible second, he thought the Fantan had landed a hit. But then the glow died down again, and it became clear that Harno was the origin of the silent explosion.

The energy being had grown enormously in a fraction of a second. Harno was now a meter in diameter, and he filled up a considerable part of the cockpit’s dome. Silver and golden light patterns shimmered across his spherical body.

Thank you, Julian heard inside his head. Harno’s voice suddenly sounded much stronger and more sonorous. *The transformation is complete. I can now continue my journey*.

“Hold on!” Julian called out. “You can’t just up and leave. You told us you would help us!”

I have already. Harno replied. *I have saved the information that will help you in the recon craft’s memory*.

“That’s all?” Mildred asked in disbelief.

You need no more than that. Trust me. But now I must be on my way again.

Timothy jumped up. “Harno, please don’t go! Not without me! Take me with you! Take me to the stars!”

Julian’s eyes widened, and he looked at his friend in shock. “Have you lost your mind, Timmyboy?”

Timothy looked towards him. His eyes were shimmering in Harno’s glow. “No, I haven’t. I’ve never seen things as clearly in my entire life as I do right now.”

Remember, Timothy you’re only a human, Harno said.

The young man turned back to face the glowing sphere. “But you yourself said that we are similar! That you had waited for me. I’m like you. It can’t be a coincidence that we met one another. You—trapped for ten thousand years—and me, who only two months ago hardly dared to dream that I would ever leave the Earth. Us meeting one another was against all odds. It must have been fate. I belong in the stars. I’ve always wanted to travel among them, just like you. Take me with you!”

A green shimmer fluttered across Harno’s body. It felt to Julian like a confirmation. *If that is your wish. But you will never see your home planet again. You must leave everything behind you including your form as a human being. Are you ready to pay this price, Timothy?*

Timothy nodded. “Yes, I am.”

He looked at Julian and Mildred. “I’m sorry, friends. But it’s what I have to do.”

Julian got up. “Then there’s nothing left to do but wish you all the best. Make sure you do good things out there.” He stretched his hand out to Timothy, who squeezed it briefly.

Mildred also stood up and, to Julian’s surprise, as well as Timothy’s, she hugged the thin young man and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Look after yourself. And if you can, come back to us sometime and tell us about your journeys.”

Timothy nodded shyly. “I’ll do that,” he promised. Then he took a deep breath and turned to Harno. “I’m ready.”

Then come to me. All of a sudden, Harno swelled up and became so big that he filled the entire cockpit.

Julian had a sense of infinite vastness, as if he were floating very high up and looking down on the entire universe. At the same time, he had a feeling of great serenity. The kind that only an ancient spirit can feel.

Is that Harno? he asked himself, full of wonder and awe. *Am I looking into his innermost self?*

The impression was gone as fast as it had come. Harno shrank and soon was once again the silver and golden shimmering sphere he had been.

Timothy was gone.

Before either of them had a chance to say anything, Harno shot through the transparent dome of the cockpit as if it wasn't there and hurried off faster than any spaceship ever could have. He became smaller and disappeared beyond the sun between the stars.

"Have a good journey, Timmyboy," Julian murmured as he watched Harno and Timothy speed away. He felt Mildred's hand take his and squeeze it briefly.

A ruby-red beam flashed beside them, and a load bang brought them back to the present.

"Oh crap, the Fantan," Julian cursed. He threw himself back into the pilot's seat. "Mildred, you take care of the information Harno mentioned. I'll try to get us away from here." His fingers flew across the control panel as he took the ship into full thrust.

"This is crazy," Mildred said as she looked at the tracking screen.

"What?"

"The Fantan ships didn't come any closer while we were saying goodbye to Timothy and Harno. They should have reached us already. Instead, they're still almost half a million kilometers away."

"Super, then all we have is ten seconds until they get here?" Julian asked, as he turned the recon craft on its axis, making them more difficult to hit.

"Just under fifteen," Mildred corrected him.

Julian looked over at his girlfriend. "It's probably better to wonder about this phenomenon later! Can you take a look at the computer now?!"

“I’m already on it,” she said, annoyed. She entered a few commands into the control panel.

Space all around them was lit up by flashes of energy. The pursuers seemed to be shooting at them.

“Come on,” Julian said through tightly squeezed lips. “Get moving, you dozy thing!”

“I’m already accelerating at the maximum permissible rate,” the Positronic announced.

“I wasn’t talking to you directly,” Julian said, but realizing a second later that he was, as the ship and the Positronic were one and the same. “But now that you’re here, can’t you take us a little above the maximum permissible speed?”

“That would not be safe for the passengers,” the computer protested.

Another ruby-red beam flared up behind them, and the recon craft shivered as it was hit in the rear.

“I don’t give a damn,” Julian said grimly. “Even if the pressure pulls the fillings out of our teeth. All I care about is getting away from the Fantan and getting home alive.”

“I understand,” the Positronic said. “I shall redirect all energy to the drive.”

“No, wait!” Mildred said. “I’ve found something here. It looks like a code.”

“That is correct,” the Positronic confirmed. “The file you’re talking about is an Arkonide control code.”

Julian frowned. “An Arkonide control code? What are we supposed to do with that?”

“Could it be a key to the Venus refuge?” Mildred asked.

“Possibly...or ...” A crazy thought came to him. If he was right,

then Harno really had done them a great service. “Mildred, I think I know what we have here. Radio the code immediately to Mercant and the others on Earth. This could change everything.”

Mildred looked at him, confused for a second. Then her face lit up as she also understood. “I’m already on it. The code is being transmitted as we speak.”

Julia nodded, satisfied. She had done her job. “And now, let’s get out of here. Computer, take over the steering and show us what this ship is capable of.”

“Understood,” the Positronic said.

Half of the cockpit displays went dark. At the same time, the ship shivered as it accelerated in a way that those who’d built it had not designed it for. Despite the active pressure absorber, Julian felt as if he had an elephant sitting on his chest. The insane increase in speed pressed him into the pilot’s seat. He had difficulty breathing, and the skin on his face looked as if it wanted to crawl to the back of his head.

He managed to turn his head a little to the side using every bit of strength he had and looked at Mildred. She looked back at him with glazed eyes. The G-forces meant they had to battle to stay conscious.

He would have liked to have lifted his hand and taken hers. But he was unable to do it. *I love you*, he said, forming the words soundlessly with his lips as the world around him lost all color. He didn’t know whether she had heard his silent avowal or not.

Her response—if she even responded—was something Julian no longer saw. His field of vision narrowed. Then he was engulfed in darkness.

13.

Operation TOSOMA

August 4, 2036

Not far from the Azores

Crest should actually have been feeling better during this second dive. After all, they had successfully fooled the dome's Positronic. The false skin he was in and its DNA pattern, which made it look as if he were the thousands of years old commander of the complex, had proved to be effective.

However, the Arkonide scientist felt a little uneasy. The last time somebody had tried to gain access to the Arkonide spaceship on the ocean floor, not far from the dome, they had been shot and killed without any warning. All that had been left of He Jian-Dong's submarine was a pile of burning embers that had quickly cooled down in the cold water of the Atlantic.

Crest hoped he wasn't about to suffer the same fate. Likewise for his companion, Tatiana Michalovna, who was walking right next to him on the sandy bottom of the sea.

Just like him, the young woman—who, thanks to her telepathic powers, probably knew more about him than any other human—was wearing an Arkonide multi-purpose suit. Although she had little experience with this kind of suit, you wouldn't have known she was wearing it for the first time.

Crest asked himself whether she was trying to impress him. He had already noticed over the past few days that she had developed a strong interest in everything Arkonide in general, and in him in particular. Whether that was because she wanted to find out more about his search for the planet of eternal life or whether she saw him as a new mentor after losing Clifford Monterny, he couldn't say.

He couldn't stop thinking about the unsettling conversation they had had a week ago in his apartment in the Stardust Tower in Terrania. She had admitted that she knew his secret and had promised to keep it to herself. If—in return—he shared immortality with her as soon as he found it. He could never have answered such a demand. Then their conversation had been interrupted

Since then, Tatiana had often sought him out and stayed close to him. In that time, they had spoken only a few words with one another, as the events had left them hardly any time for conversation. But it was clear to Crest that she was trying to connect with him.

That why he had allowed her to accompany him on this expedition, even if it was a security risk. Now he not only had to present himself to the *Tosoma's* Positronic as the commander, but also convince it to accept her as a human visitor, or rather as a *colonial Arkonide*. When he thought about it, he realized it was a stupid decision. A *gut reaction*, as the humans said.

But somehow, Tatiana's presence was no longer as unpleasant for him as in the beginning. Naturally, he had no intention of showing her his innermost self—they had not known each other long enough for that. But, in a way that he couldn't express in words, there was a connection between them.

Maybe you're looking for a second Thora, just as she is looking for a second Monterny, the voice in the back of his head said.

Crest was alarmed by the thought. *No! Mercant and the others can think what they want, but I don't believe that Perry Rhodan is dead. And neither is Thora. She will return. And then I will be there for her, like I was in all the years before.*

He knew, of course, that he was lying to himself. He didn't have a clue whether Thora would actually return or not. The chances of it happening didn't look good. And even if she was still alive, he was no longer the only man in her life. He may continue to be her mentor, but he sensed that a certain human was in the process of becoming her closest ally. She would distance herself from him—not deliberately, but it was inevitable.

And then he would be all alone, a state of affairs that he did not necessarily cherish. Maybe that was why he was willing to let Tatiana Michalovna into his life. This woman who was just as uprooted as he was. *But to what extent can I trust her?* Crest asked himself. *Only a short time ago she was my enemy!*

On the other hand, until only a short time ago, all of humanity had been his enemy. And if Crest possessed one talent, it was the ability to turn enemies into allies, possibly even into friends. Tatiana might have had a dark past, but he' had a peek behind her facade, just as she had done with him. She was lonely and vulnerable. And she was still young. He should not hold the sins of her past against her. Instead, he should try to be a better role model for her future than Monterny had been.

Crest involuntarily smiled inside his helmet. *A noble objective.*

"Crest?" Tatiana's voice came from the loudspeaker in his helmet. "Is everything okay with you?"

"Yes. Why would it not be?" he asked her.

"You made a strange noise," she explained.

Had he chuckled audibly? He couldn't tell. "It's nothing, Miss Michalovna. I was just thinking about things."

"I've also been thinking," Tatiana said.

Interesting, he thought. *I say "Miss Michalovna," but I'm thinking Tatiana. Whether I want it or not, she's coming closer to me all the time*. Out loud he said, "What were you thinking about Miss Michalovna?"

"About what happened yesterday in the transmitter room," she answered. "Be honest—you believed that using the transmitter would bring you one step closer to your goal."

Crest said nothing for a while. "Possibly," he finally admitted

"No point in denying it. Why else would you have rejected every other escort but chosen me, of all people, to accompany you?"

Once again, it cost him a great deal of effort to answer. “Perhaps because I am beginning to appreciate your presence.” That wasn’t exactly the entire truth, but it also wasn’t a lie. He hoped that she would be so surprised by this confession that she would not pursue the actual topic of their conversation any further. But he hoped in vain.

“That is very kind of you, Crest. Really, I’m thankful that you no longer see me as Monterny’s instrument. That means a great deal to me. However, or perhaps even more so, it makes me wonder why you broke off the expedition with the transmitter at the last minute.”

Crest stopped and turned his suit towards Tatiana. Through the visor of his helmet, he could see the young oval face of the Russian woman. There was a question in her eyes.

“Miss Michalovna…Tatiana…I cannot answer that question for you in one sentence. It is complicated.”

“You could at least try,” she said.

Crest sighed. “Look, Tatiana, when I turned up on Earth, my encounter with Perry Rhodan and with humanity set a number of things in motion that I didn’t expect. Now I have become a part of something bigger than myself. Something that I can’t turn away from just to pursue my own wishes.”

“Does that mean you’re giving up?” Her expression was one of disbelief.

The Arkonide shook his head. “No. But I am placing my own welfare behind that of humanity. We will resume the search for the planet of eternal life another time. Not when I want to, but when the time is right. And this is not the right time. Now…” He pointed towards the huge shadow towering above them. “Now we must go to the *Tosoma* and convince it that I am the commander from thousands of years ago, okay?”

Tatiana pressed her lips together, making a thin line of them. She obviously did not like Crest’s comments at all. For a moment, it

looked as if she would simply turn back or do something else that was stupid. But then she nodded.

“I hope that, by making this decision, you’ve not taken away the only chance we had of witnessing the wonder of immortality.”

“We shall see,” Crest said. “Have a little faith in the future.”

Then he turned around again and walked towards the *Tosoma*.

Shortly after that, they reached the colossal spaceship, although the word “colossal” was under-exaggerated. Crest knew from its dimensions that the battleship had a diameter of just over eight hundred meters. About a tenth of that was buried in the sea floor. The rest was protruding upward as high as a cliff.

“Oh my God...” Tatiana murmured in awe. “I wasn’t aware of how unbelievably huge the ship was. From a distance it somehow looked smaller.” She bent her head back, but it was no use. The light on the front of her helmet didn’t even reach the equatorial ring of the giant battleship.

Crest could understand how the telepath felt. When he was this close to the *Tosoma*, he also felt a certain rush of excitement. The *Aetron*, with its diameter of five hundred meters, was anything but small, yet this artifact from thousands of years ago had more than four times the volume of his former craft

“How are we going to get into the ship?” Tatiana asked.

“I’m going to try to get in in the same way I got into the dome,” he told her. “If the on-board computer is still active, it should actually work.” He turned towards the Positronic in his suit. “Send an automatic identification signal. Tell the *Tosoma* that her commander has returned.”

“Affirmative.”

She sent the radio signal silently. Nothing happened.

Crest studied the display in his helmet, which was showing a stylized image of the *Tosoma* as a fist-sized sphere. He asked himself

whether the ship had opened an airlock somewhere that they couldn't see from their current position. But it didn't look like that was the case.

Tatjana cleared her throat. "Maybe we should..."

Suddenly the two of them were bathed in bright light. Several floodlights on the lower shell of the *Tosoma* were aimed right at them, highlighting their tiny figures in the darkness of the sea.

Crest winced in his suit while Tatiana cursed in her mother tongue. "Okay, so the ship knows we're here," she said sarcastically.

There was a deep thundering sound as the hatch in the body of the ship started to open ten meters from where they were standing. A reddish energy shield came to life to keep out the mass of water.

"Looks like an invitation," Tatiana said.

"Yes, it does," Crest confirmed

He was just about to activate his spacesuit drive to move towards the airlock when the blueish light of a tractor beam took hold of them. Without being able to resist it, Tatiana and he were lifted up. Crest could hear the Russian woman cough nervously through the radio connection in his helmet.

"No need to be afraid," he said. "Nothing will happen to us." *Because if the on-board Positronic had wanted to kill us, we would already be dead*, he thought to himself.

They reached the inside of the airlock, a gigantic chamber where, in the earlier times, the *Tosoma's* auxiliary craft had presumably been kept. It was now completely empty. And it was no longer possible to tell what had happened to the smaller spacespheres.

The tractor beam placed them down on the metal floor while, behind them, the hatch began to lower again. With thunderous noise the barrier—which weighed tons—closed. Immediately afterwards the energy shield was deactivated

For a moment they stood in the darkness. The only light they had was from their helmets. which wandered across the walls. Then some machine sprang to life with a buzzing sound, and a wall of blue light appeared above their heads. Humming at a low frequency, it scanned them, pulsating all the time, and then repeated the process a second time.

“What is it?” Tatiana asked. She was obviously having some effort sounding calm. There was a definite note of fear in her voice

“It’s a security check,” Crest presumed. “We’re being scanned to verify my identity.”

He was right, because immediately after that the light in the chamber went on, and the board Positronic spoke. “Welcome on board, Commander. The *Tosoma* is at your service.”

That sounded good. All he had to do now was to play his role well. Crest stiffened and put on a serious expression. “Excellent. What’s the ship’s status?”

“The ship’s status is unchanged,” the Positronic answered. “The hyper radio equipment has been damaged irreparably. The translight drive, the impulse drives, the life preservation system and protective shield work, but with reduced functionality. Shell integrity is eighty-three percent. The lower pole battery made of heavy thermal canons has been irreparably damaged. Seven of the twelve ventral guns as well. The upper pole battery, the upper five ventral guns, as well as all twelve dorsal guns are either functional or only have light to middling damage. Do you also want a status report on all secondary systems? Or should I simply place a protocol file in my memory for you to look at later?”

“The latter, please,” Crest said. He couldn’t be bothered listening to the Positronic go through all the board systems for the next half hour. They had already heard the most important information anyway—the *Tosoma* was flightworthy!

Crest felt an unbelievable sense of relief. With the *Tosoma*, they had a spaceship in their hands that offered them unimagined possibilities. “Let’s look around a bit,” he suggested, turning to

Tatiana.

“Certainly, Commander,” she said. Before they had set off, they had agreed that she would always address him by the rank he was playing while we were on board, as they still didn’t know what the name of the former commander of the *Tosoma* had been.

“Would you like to leave your protective suits here?” the Positronic asked.

“Yes, we would be glad to,” Crest said. The suits were bulky and, outside of the water, they were also pretty heavy. Excited by their success so far, the elderly Arkonide hastily began to remove his suit.

He lowered the helmet into the collar, loosened the fasteners at his wrists, and pulled off the thick gloves. Then he opened the clasps on his backpack.

“Miss Michalovna, could you give me a hand, please?”

“Of course.” The Russian woman came over and helped Crest unclip his backpack. She was pulling it aside to put down on the ground when it happened.

Crest’s hand slipped and scraped over the sharp edge of the backpack. The elderly Arkonide instinctively winced, but he did not feel any pain. When he pulled his hand back and lifted it in front of his face, he saw that only the outer second skin was cut, while his own skin was undamaged. *I was lucky*, he thought.

“Is everything okay, Commander?” the Positronic promptly asked.

“Yes, why do you ask?” Crest wanted to know, as he quickly covered his cut hand with the other one.

“I got the impression you injured yourself.”

Crest shook his head. “No, it’s nothing.” *The genetic camouflage*.

“Let me have a look at it,” the Positronic insisted. Before Crest could even protest, a bluish curtain of light came to life again and

slid, pulsating, over the elderly Arkonide twice.

Crest suppressed a curse that would have been inappropriate both for his age or for his position.

“Something’s not right Commander,” the computer stated. “I am detecting a genetic anomaly in your hand.”

Tatiana gave him a furtive look.

“What are you saying?” Crest coughed. “Can’t be. You must be mistaken.” He indicated to Tatiana to help him inconspicuously put his backpack on again.

“I am never wrong,” the Positronic announced. “The data tells me that there is mutated DNA. Please go to the sickbay, Commander. I should take a closer look. You could be ill without knowing it.”

“That’s nonsense,” Crest argued, while he put his backpack on again, snapping the clasps closed. “I feel perfectly healthy. And now, enough of this talk!”

The Positronic was silent for a while. The Arkonide scientist had already begun to hope that he had convinced it he was fine.

However, his hopes were dashed completely only a minute later. “Commander,” the computer said, “please tell me the authorization code.”

“Excuse me,” Crest stuttered, having just bent down to pick up his gloves.

“Please tell me the authorization code.”

“I...ehm...it’s quite a long time since I left this ship.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’ve forgotten the authorization code?”

Crest shook his head “No...I ... How could the Commander of a ship forget an authorization code!” This was, as a matter of fact,

something that almost never happened.

A lamp started flashing in the collar of his helmet, indicating that a radio message had arrived. It could only be from Mercant and Pounder in the dome. *Not now*, Crest thought.

"You're right," the positronic said. "Which is why I am asking you once again to tell me the authorization code."

The thoughts of the elderly scientist were racing. The system of authorization codes for Arkonide ships followed a certain pattern. But there were so many ships in the Empire that it was impossible to guess one for the Tosoma even if he had known exactly when and where the ship had been built.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tatiana close her helmet. Her lips began to move. She had obviously received the radio message.

"I..." *The game's over*, he thought

"You're not the Commander," the Positronic said straight out. "Who are you? Answer or I must eliminate you."

I'll try telling the truth, Crest thought. *I am an Arkonide. Perhaps that will suffice.*

"It's true," Crest said. He stiffened. If he was going to die, then he wouldn't die as a coward but with his head held high. "I am not the Commander. I am—"

"He is his successor," Crest suddenly heard in his helmet. "When the old Commander realized that he would never return, he transferred command of the *Tosoma* to him. He will prove it to you."

Surprised, Crest turned to Tatiana. Had she gone crazy? What was she talking about? The Russian woman looked at him urgently, all the while inconspicuously pointing at the collar of his suit.

The radio message!

Crest activated the connection.

Instead of hearing a voice, a display was activated in the collar of his suit. A twelve-digit series of Arkonide symbols appeared.

His eyes widened. Where had Mercant and Pounder gotten this data from?

“Then prove it, successor of the Commander,” the Positronic demanded. “Tell me the code or I will have no choice but to eliminate you.”

“Certainly,” Crest said, steeling himself. Hopefully, the combination of symbols was not simply the serial number of some cleaning robot. But what choice did he have? He had to at least try. He read out the code.

There was a deathly silence in the chamber that lasted several seconds. Finally, the Positronic said, “Authorization code confirmed. I have identified you as the Commander. What are my orders?”

At that moment, the elderly Arkonide scientist could have jumped into the air and screamed out loud with joy.

14.

A Desperate Plan

Kerlon's bastion, Lannol

Before long, they had all assembled in the *Tosoma X* control center. Rhodan and Thora, the two mutants, Ras Tschubai and Wuriu Sengu, and the Ferrons, Lossoshér and Chaktor.

The two aliens had calmed down somewhat. Yet, from their faces it was plain to see that, on the inside, they were committed to the final battle. Rhodan hoped things would not get that far.

"The situation is like this," he began, once he had made sure everyone was paying attention. "We still have around twenty-six hours until the ceasefire the Thort imposed on the Ferron tribes expires. After that, there will be an uprising against the Topsidans, as a result of which this war will reach an entirely new level of aggression, no doubt costing the lives of thousands if not millions. I cannot and will not allow that to happen."

"None of us want to die," admitted Lossoshér. "But what other options are there for preventing the Topsidans from simply taking control of our solar system? The Thort said it himself: there's no negotiating with them. They only understand violence."

Rhodan shook his head. "I don't believe that. No race that has managed to navigate its way to the stars can consist of purely empty-headed, narrow-minded sheep. There must be some great minds—visionaries, dreamers, thinkers—among the Topsidans too. And not just on their home planet, but out here as well. We have to get in touch with them."

"How do you intend to do that?" asked Tschubai. "Why should the Topsidans listen to us? We have nothing to offer them. We're the minor lights in this battle."

"Wrong!" Rhodan contradicted him. "We are what we make of

ourselves, because human beings are an unknown quantity for the Topsidans." He grinned. "But 'lights' isn't far off base. My plan is as follows. Based on their tradition, the Ferrons believe that, in times of darkness, somebody will return the light to them as has already happened once before. Until now, I have avoided seeing us in the role of these light-bearers. Essentially, out here in space, metaphorically speaking, we're no more than kids who want to play with the adults. But fortunately for us, the adults don't know that yet."

A look of understanding appeared on Wuriu's face. "So we put a false beard on, disguise our voices, and pretend to be adults," he said, continuing Rhodan's chain of thought.

"Exactly," the latter confirmed. "We'll go one step further, even. We'll claim to be the *even-more grown-up* adults. The light-bearers from the Ferron tradition. The *Tosoma X* places Arkonide technology at our disposal. If we play our cards right, we can maybe fool the Topsidans into believing that we have got much more of this sort of thing up our sleeves."

Chaktor laughed enthusiastically. "We'll outsmart the lizards. Sounds like a good plan. I *knew* it. I knew you were the one to return the light to us, Rhodan. Isn't that right, Lossoshér?"

The gray transmitter guard nodded and a spark of hope now lit up his eyes too.

Tschubai seemed less convinced. "Great, Perry. We'll maybe get the Ferrons on our side with this trick. We'll be certain to attract the attention of the Topsidans. But how do we prevent ourselves from simply being blasted out of the sky by the lizards after we've gone in all gung-ho?"

"I don't know for sure yet," admitted Rhodan. "But I don't think that will happen. As soon as we've persuaded the Topsidans to talk to us, something will come up. Think about everything we've been through so far! It seemed like we were going to die on more than one occasion, but we always found a way of surviving. Not because we had a particularly good plan or were prepared for every eventuality, but because we paid good attention to our environment

at precisely the right moments and made use of the opportunities that came our way. Sometimes that's the best approach."

"Assuming a person can flip a switch like you, you mean," Thora said mockingly from the side.

"*You* should talk." Rhodan looked at the group assembled before him and held out his arms expectantly. "Or does anybody else have a better idea?"

A silence followed, as if by way of reply. All the alternatives had already been discussed.

To Rhodan's surprise, it was Thora, of all people, who again continued. The Arkonide woman raised her chin and straightened herself.

"I say we do as Perry suggests," she announced decisively. "It may not be a perfect plan, but it makes the most of the resources we have—this ship and the faith of the Ferrons. As long as we can uphold the charade, we'll at least prevent the Ferron tribes from being lured to disaster. And as he said himself, with some luck, we might even be able to tempt the Topsidans to sit at the negotiating table since they won't know how much power the humans have. If we get them to think that the technological levels of human beings are even close to that of the Arkonides, the lizards will think twice before getting into a battle with us."

Rhodan nodded gratefully. "That's the way I see it too. Anybody object?"

Lossoshér and Chaktor shook their heads. Tschubai exchanged glances with Wuriu, then acknowledged his agreement.

"Very good. In that case, our goal now is to make the *Tosoma X* flightworthy. That will be quite a task, and we don't have much time to do it. So let's get started! Thora?"

The Arkonide woman, who knew the auxiliary craft's technology best of all, began to assign tasks, and the men left the control center to start their work. They were to be aided by Kerlon's ancient robot

assistant, Curaploy, and the few other surviving machines.

Before they could leave the control center, however, Rhodan stopped them. “Thora. I need some more advice from you.”

She raised her eyebrows, astonished. “What sort?”

Rhodan took her to the side. “I didn’t want to say it out loud just now,” he admitted in a muffled tone, “but I also share Ras’s concern that the Topsidans might simply shoot us down as soon as we have their attention. We need some sort of ruse to give us time. I already have an idea, but I need your opinion on it. You know the Topsidans better than anyone here. What do you think? Why are they in the Vega system?”

Thora frowned. “Well, obviously they see the Vega system as part of their extended sphere of influence and have come to claim it for themselves. By no means a new approach on their part. The Topsidans are an aggressive people with a strong urge to expand. I learned a lot about them during my incarceration.”

“You don’t think this is merely an excuse they give to prevent simple soldiers and lower-ranking officers wondering why they’re attacking such a backward system? Let’s take a look at this in more detail. As far as I can see, the Vega system has nothing like the resources needed to justify a war of this type. All advanced races that travel to space can extract riches from the ground that are far superior from uninhabited systems and asteroid fields. Are the Ferrons that advanced? Are the Topsidans interested in a race of slaves?”

He shook his head, then continued. “That seems unlikely to me too. If you want to enslave a race, you take a look at them beforehand to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. You go and visit them, pretending to be a trader or benefactor, maybe bribe a few tribal leaders. And then you leave it to these leaders to provide the slaves by offering to buy their enemies off them. In addition, there are no reports of any major abductions. Again, a war of that type would not justify this. It would even be counterproductive, as we can see at present. If you alienate all the Ferrons and have no allies among them, it’s almost impossible to

deploy them as useful workers."

Thora looked at him for a moment, reflecting. Finally, she nodded hesitantly. "Your analysis seems reasonable enough. However, you are using human standards of logic. Human beings prefer to negotiate than to fight, as I have seen already. Topsidans, on the other hand, seem to prefer to fight rather than talk. For this reason, they pursue a path that is not always the best one to attain their goal, which in my view is one of the reasons the lizards will likely never play an important role in galacto-politics no matter how dearly they would like to."

"So you actually believe this is only about conquest? About subjugating their neighbors just for the sake of it?"

Again, it took a while for Thora to answer. Rhodan could see her thinking. That alone basically confirmed the certainty that had been growing within him more and more these past few days, that there was more to the Vega system than met the eye. There was a secret here, a jigsaw in which, among others, the strange, ancient transmitters and the missing tenth planet were pieces.

Thora knew more about this than she cared to admit. He was certain of it. One day he would also take her to task about it. But not today.

"No," she finally admitted. "No, it is indeed possible that the Topsidans—or at least their leaders—have a different motive." She looked at Rhodan intently. "They could be after the transmitters. They are items of unknown value. I have no idea what they can really do, apart from instantaneous transportation over millions of kilometers. And the Ferrons, too, appear until now to have only scratched the surface of the puzzle the transmitters pose. So it's conceivable that the Topsidans have somehow gotten wind of these things and think they might hasten their rise to power. If I were part of their current leadership, I would probably order an expedition to the Vega system to gain possession of them."

Rhodan nodded with satisfaction. "Thank you, Thora! That was exactly what I wanted to hear."

The repair work took almost twenty-four hours, so they were finally ready two hours before the deadline the Thort had set for his people. They could consider themselves fortunate. however. The sixty-meter auxiliary ship that (with a considerable amount of gallows humor) Wuriu had rechristened *Last Hope*, could have been in a far worse condition, damaged beyond repair, even. But even though nothing was left of Kerlon's lofty plans for a planet-wide Arkonide bastion beyond a few stakes driven randomly into the rock, hangar-like caves full of scrap metal, and a mighty vault of mummified Arkonides, the old guard of Lannol *had* looked after his control center commendably.

Or maybe it was just the Positronic and their small band of mechanized helpers who had at least kept the *Last Hope* operational enough to be rendered fit for space with some simple repair work.

They couldn't go to war with the ship, of course. Its weapons and protective shield were much too weak and antiquated. Apart from that, their attempt to become involved in a power struggle with the Arkonide cruiser captured by the Topsidans using the *Good Hope*, their sister ship from the Venus refuge, showed that nothing could be achieved against the lizard invaders in this way.

But we don't want to go to war, thought Rhodan, casting his eyes over the control center where his companions were busy preparing for take-off. *We want to end it.*

Secretly, he was worried about the outcome of this daring but crazy undertaking, yet he kept a stiff upper lip. He gave a sign to Thora, who, as the most experienced among them, had assumed control of the ship.

"Take us into space."

"Right away," she replied, gliding her hands over the sensor panels of the holographic consoles around her.

The *Last Hope* shook as the telescopic supports, which had been extended a long time ago, were released from the ground of the hangar with a grinding noise, and retracted with a metallic scraping sound into the spherical body of the spaceship.

“Anti-gravity fields stable,” Thora reported. “Activate the maneuvering jets. Now things are getting interesting.”

The auxiliary craft hovered slowly over the floor of the hangar towards the exit. The gate was a hundred meters wide and eighty meters high, recessed into the side of a mountain. According to the ship’s Positronic, it had been a long time since the gate had worked. Besides, as Rhodan had observed during an inspection, vast amounts of rubble and soil had gathered in front of it.

The only option was to blast the path clear. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a single torpedo left in the side boat’s arsenal, and Rhodan was not sure anyway whether he would have wanted to put a ten-thousand-year-old explosive into a torpedo shaft. So they had to make do with the two thermo canons on the poles, only one of which was still returning thirty percent power.

It’ll be enough, he thought. *It has to be enough!*

“Fire!” he commanded.

Thora, who was still taking care of the controls, nodded to Wuriu. Positioned at the weapons monitor, the mutant touched the trigger panel. The two canons unloaded themselves with a thunderous blast, and the heavy hangar gate was torn open in an explosion of metal, rubble, and soil. A few well-aimed shots later and they had created a gap large enough to be able to steer the side ship through.

“We may already have attracted the Topsidans’ attention with that,” Tschubai, who was sitting at the tracking equipment, commented sarcastically.

“I doubt it,” countered Thora, “But the blast that accompanies our take-off will no doubt grab their attention.”

Something in her tone of voice caused Rhodan to sit up and take notice. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I’ve prepared the transmitter,” she explained. “It will be destroyed automatically when we take off. It’s important that the

Topsidans don't get their hands on this high-end technology."

"You what?" Rhodan looked at her with a sharp glance. "Keep the ignition open, Thora! We shouldn't be too quick—"

"Too late," she interrupted him, pointing at the holo-shield, the screen of which showed the view behind and below the *Last Hope*, which was ascending quickly into the sky. The picture shuddered briefly as if it were unstable.

A moment later, it became clear to Rhodan that it was not the picture itself, but the earth below them that had shuddered! In a mighty explosion, as if a huge ancient volcano had erupted, the steep mountain range was torn open on the banks of Lake Platin. Glistening light turned the Lannol night into day and swelled up below them in a semi-circle.

"By Thort!" shouted Chaktor, almost stricken with awe. "What have you done? Have you set off an atomic bomb down there?"

"Something like that," the Arkonide woman answered without offering further details.

Leaving the inferno on the planet's surface behind, the *Last Hope* climbed into space, its jets roaring.

Here we go again, thought Rhodan. *Let's hope it's not our final journey.*

15.

Bringers of the Light …

Last Hope, Vega system

They decided to set course for Ferrol, thinking it would have the greatest overall effect if they gave their last great performance there and showed themselves to the Topsidans.

While Thora was looking after the controls of the *Last Hope* and Tschubai was keeping an eye on the remote scanner, Rhodan sat down with Chaktor and Lossoshér so that the two Ferrons might help him translate his words into their own language. Of course, he could have just used the translator he carried about with him, but Rhodan wanted to present himself as directly as possible to the Ferrons, as a man who spoke their language, albeit with an exotic accent.

"We've almost reached Ferrol," Thora announced a short while later.

Rhodan looked up. "Any movement from the Topsidans?" he asked.

"Plenty," answered Tschubai. "But if I'm reading the monitors correctly, they're mainly small units and a few troop transporters. There are no large battleships in orbit at present."

"Well, that will change," Wuriu murmured from the weapon controls.

Rhodan looked at Chaktor and Lossoshér with a serious expression. The two Ferrons nodded at him encouragingly.

"You won't win any prizes for your speech," the warrior said, "but it is the message that counts, not how you package it."

Rhodan nodded thankfully. Taking a deep breath, he stood up. "Let's do it. Thora, please activate the recording device at the

control station and broadcast my message to the planets of the Vega system on all frequencies. Ras, tune in to the news and pirate stations, please. I want to know how much resonance my words have."

"Doing it right now, Perry," his Sudanese friend confirmed.

Rhodan looked over at the Arkonide. "Thora?"

"When you give the signal, the broadcast will commence, bearer of the light." The corners of her mouth twitched tellingly.

"Bearer of the light," thought Rhodan. *Or even Lucifer.* In the minds of most people, it was a name that was synonymous with the devil. Yet it was a Latin name for the morning star, Venus. Curiously, they had found the *Last Hope's* sister ship, the *Good Hope*, on Venus, which was how they had reached the Vega system in the first place. Therefore, the bearer of the light technically came from the bearer of the light. Everything was interconnected like a huge galactic jigsaw puzzle.

Concentrate! Rhodan told himself. He nodded to Thora. "Now!"

She touched some controls and all of a sudden he was enshrouded in a ball of light. *How fitting.*

"Ferron tribes!" he said in a loud, clear voice. "In line with your tradition—in times of great darkness, somebody will come to return the light to you. You had to wait for a long time. You had to fight for a long time. You had to suffer for a long time. But now the waiting, the fighting, and suffering are at an end. We have heard your call for help. We have returned. We come bearing the light that brightens the darkness. A new day is dawning for the Ferrons. A new age of peace shall ensue. And it shall start right now, at this moment. We promise you that. We, the bringers of light!"

He gave Thora a brief signal, and the Arkonide cut the connection.

"Great, Perry," Tschubai praised him. "Very poignant."

"Oh, shut up," Rhodan growled. He would never have admitted

it, but he had been suffering from a little stage-fright before his performance. Making great speeches was not necessarily one of his favorite activities. “How are things looking out there?”

A grin appeared on the teleporter’s face. “I’d say it was a direct hit.” He activated the holoshield and switched on the images from the various news channels in the Vega system, both legal and illegal.

The same scenes were being shown everywhere. Excited newsreaders were commenting on Rhodan’s brief speech. Shots of jubilant Ferrons falling into each other’s arms and raising their hands up in thanks to heaven accompanied the breaking news. And again and again, the same words could be heard: *“We are bringing the light that brightens the darkness. A new day is dawning for the Ferrons. A new age of peace shall ensue. And it shall start right now, at this moment.”*

A triumphant smile came to Rhodan’s face. “Very good. We’ve avoided the worst. The final battle is postponed for the moment.”

“We’ve managed it!” Wuriu cried out with enthusiasm, beginning to applaud. Tschubai and the two Ferrons joined in too.

Only Thora remained unmoved by this enthusiasm. “Let’s not celebrate too soon,” she warned them. “That was the easy part of the plan. The difficult part is about to come. I’m sensing a huge transition quake in the direct vicinity!”

Straight away, their jubilation faded.

“The Topsidans?” asked Rhodan, alarmed.

“Who else?” she replied. “Based on the strength of the quake, it must be the *Rugr-Krehn*.”

The image on the holoshield changed and showed the section of space directly in front of them just in time to see a flash of light. A fraction of a second later, from out of nowhere, the gigantic steel body of the Arkonide battleship hovered in front of them in the blackness.

“Status?” asked Rhodan quickly.

“Protective shields are up, weapon systems activated.” At that moment, two heavy-duty thermo-canons, six thermo-guns, and six disintegrators were taking aim at them. Four ports were open for space torpedoes as well. Thora looked up. “If you ask me, the Topsidans are really angry.”

“Oh my God,” murmured Tschubai. His face turned pale. “Oh my God, please don’t.”

Rhodan couldn’t begrudge him that. This demonstration of concentrated force was making even him tremble at the knees. A single blast and they would simply be wiped out of space. There was no escape. They had laid their deck on the table, and it looked as if they had taken too much of a gamble.

But they still had an ace up their sleeves.

His lips tightly sealed, Rhodan gave Thora a sign. “Activate the hyperradio.”

The time had come. The time to find out whether he was capable of adding to the list of famous last words.

“This is Perry Rhodan speaking. I have a message for Genkt-Tarm, the supreme commander of the Topsidan invasion fleet. We have what you are looking for. I repeat, we have what you are looking for.”

Nothing happened for a few seconds. The metal space monster simply hovered diagonally above them, a Damocles sword of fear-inducing size.

Rhodan exchanged glances with Thora. In contrast to her comrades, the face of the Arkonide woman resembled a mask. On the faces of Tschubai, Wuriu, and the two Ferrons were looks of fear.

Hopefully I’m not mistaken, Rhodan thought. *Hopefully the Topsidans are really after the transmitters and the secret that surrounds them.*

A glimmering beam of light shot towards them from the circular rim of the battleship. The *Last Hope* shook as it took a hit.Wuriu cried out.

“No worries!” called out Thora. “Everything is okay. It was only a tractor beam. They’re reeling us in.” The Arkonide looked over at Rhodan. “Your trick worked.”

Rhodan should have breathed a sigh of relief, but he didn’t feel relieved at all. Yes, their trick had worked, but for how long? How long could he go on playing with fire without getting burned?

Silently overcome with worry, Perry Rhodan saw a huge gate open up in the battleship’s equatorial ring, and their small space craft was pulled inside the monster...

Episode 16: Finale for Ferrol

By Christian Montillon

“The pattern of the stars is frozen music.”

The first Thort, when he looked into the sky for the last time.

Prologue

Firelight

The spark that ignited was tiny, but it grew. At almost the same instant, it was akin to the flame of a match, and in less than the blink of an eye, the blaze of a flamethrower.

It didn't end there. Of course not. Ivan Goratschin knew that the power of his psi gift went much farther.

Just like back then.

The fireball expanded. The murderous heat melted the sand, and not only that. Beings who had still been alive moments earlier fizzled and died without even noticing. They were deceived until the very end; their brains didn't have enough time to feel their own expirations before they dissolved into atomic shreds.

Everything was repeating. Ivan had destroyed and ruined once before without actually wanting to do it, and afterwards, life had only granted him a brief period of peace. Peace that he had chased after so fixedly, and that he believed he would find with Ishy Matsu. But life had torn him away, forced him back to the same barbarous point again.

"Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." The physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the man known as the father of the atomic bomb, had cited these words from the *Bhagavad Gita*, a central holy scripture of Hinduism, when he experienced the detonation of a nuclear weapon for the first time and observed the results.

It was a terrible, gruesome realization, and yet Oppenheimer had never actually been Death himself. At most, he had paved the way for Death by laying the groundwork for the atom bomb. Not like Ivan Goratschin. He *was* Death. The power to kindle flames, tear atoms to shreds, and unleash a devastating explosion lay inside. In his brain. In his...gift.

He'd been left with no other choice. He had to do it. Only this time, he had chosen the path of destruction of his own free will. No Clifford Monterny was there to force him with the power of his unique mind. There were no mutants abusing Ivan as their tool.

"Ishy," Goratschin whispered, "I am Death."

The words came out of his mouth at a barely audible volume, and yet they woke him up.

The blood throbbed painfully in his carotid artery, and the rushing in his ears seemed louder than a waterfall in the middle of the room. It took a moment before his gaze could sharpen the blurry *something* on the wall: the projection of the alarm clock showed him that it was 2:09 in the morning on August 6, 2036.

The neon blue of the digital display bathed the room in a pale, ghostly light. The hell of the nuclear explosion Ivan had seen in his dream still danced in the darkness. He couldn't dispel the images, because they had been far more than just a dream. Only a few more hours and they could become a reality.

Ivan blinked and tried to banish the visions. He only managed it when he felt a sharp pain. His teeth had bored into the tip of his tongue. It tasted metallic. A drop of blood ran over his lips and chin.

Ishy lay beside him, her arms stretched out to the side, her dark hair hanging half over her face; every breath made a small strand dance in front of her lips. By day, she usually wore it tied in a braid.

She was lying on her stomach, the covers having slipped down to her waist. Ivan watched the hair moving in front of her mouth. It was unbelievably calming. So peaceful. Nothing like what they'd be doing in a few hours.

"Ivan," she had said before falling asleep naked in his arms, "you know what we have to do?" A tear had glimmered in the corner of her eye.

He knew, of course. “Yes, Ishy. I know. And I thank you.”

“What for?”

“For saying *we* have to do it even though it’s actually my task alone.”

In the present moment, he again whispered, “I am Death, Ishy.”

Her eyelids fluttered. She turned around, still half in sleep’s grasp. But was that a smile he’d seen on her lips just then?

He closed his eyes. The images returned: the raging flames sparked by the death in his head. The nuclear explosion turning the Gobi into an inferno. Melting sand and dying life forms.

But a form stepped out of the fire. Ishy extended her arms to him. She was smiling.

It was right. He had to do it. In the end, it came down to the deaths of a few for the sake of the many. So that it would finally come to an end. The situation was escalating all over Earth. When the Fantan stole the Golden Gate Bridge, that had finally been the straw that broke the camel’s back. How many must have died then?

He was Ivan Goratschin, and he had to do it. He only killed to save. The deaths in the Gobi, mostly Fantan, weighed against peace on Earth before the aliens’ strange raid dragged everything into the abyss with it and, ultimately, anarchy and chaos broke out. Before the whole of humanity was wiped out, perhaps.

The scales presented an unmistakable conclusion. The only question was whether every individual life weighed impossibly heavily regardless. At least on his conscience.

1.

A Desperate Gambit

Vega system, on board the Last Hope

"This is Perry Rhodan speaking. I have a message for Genkt-Tarm, the supreme commander of the Topsidan invasion fleet. We have what you are looking for. I repeat, we have what you are looking for."

They had been brave words. Audacious words. Perhaps even foolish words. For he had *nothing*. He didn't even know if his conjecture about the background of the lizard beings' invasion of the Vega system was accurate or not. Had they indeed come to this solar system looking for something? If so, what? Was it the transmitters—the mysterious transport devices used by the Ferrons, originating who knew where?

The crew of the enormous *Rugr-Krehn* was pulling the tiny *Last Hope* inside with a tractor beam. It was a grotesque sight: the *Rugr-Krehn* was an Arkonide battleship that had been captured by the Topsidans. A steel ball with a diameter of eight hundred meters. The *Last Hope*, with its circumference of sixty meters, looked like a toy model of the enormous starship.

A huge hatch had opened in the *Rugr-Krehn*'s equatorial bulge, like a mouth waiting to devour them. Behind it seethed blackness, darker still than all of space, in which at least the distant stars offered light—and hope.

Thora had found confident words, had stressed that Rhodan's bluff had obviously worked. Genkt-Tarm or other higher-ups in the Topsidian military leadership were loading the *Last Hope* in.

She saw it positively. He couldn't muster the same optimism. He asked himself *why* they were loading them in. To keep them prisoner and interrogate them? Or to negotiate? To hear whatever lies the aliens had come up with? Or to shoot them and take the

Last Hope as loot?

"We need to get ready," he said. "Thora will take over command. I'll hand myself over to the Topsidans, while—"

"We hide!" Thora smiled, as he expected of her, but it no longer exuded the icy chill it had until recently. "Tschubai, you'll jump with us to a suitable place. I'll lead the field team—it's not for nothing that I know my way around an Arkonide ship better than anyone else. The *Rugr-Krehn* may have been captured and taken over by the Topsidans, but it's still one of my people's ships. And we don't like being stolen from."

She took a brief look at each member of her small group: the teleporter Ras Tschubai, the scanning mutant Wuriu Sengu, who could see through solid matter, the two Ferrons Chaktor and Lossoshér, and finally she looked Perry Rhodan in the eye. "In the worst case, I know how to destroy a ship like this from the inside. And that's exactly what we'll do if all our other plans come to nothing."

He didn't object. Of course not. Thora was developing exactly what was right and necessary: the backup plan. The...emergency exit that would deliver a painful blow to the enemy if Rhodan's real plan didn't work out.

Assuming we're not way past that point already.

What could they hope to achieve? They were a desperate group of half of a dozen originating from three different planets. Thanks to their mutant gifts, Tschubai and Kakuta could catch the Topsidans unaware. But neither he, nor Thora, nor the two Ferrons could work similar miracles. Worse still, Lossoshér, the old transmitter guard, was at the end of his rope. The invasion of the lizard beings, the revelations from Kerlon, an ancient Arkonide gone mad, about the history of his people—it had all taken its toll on the old man. He could hardly keep himself standing.

Chaktor, the former spacefarer from a humble background, saw to Lossoshér, making sure that he drank, that he got rest despite the worries that wouldn't let him be. The sight was touching to Rhodan.

Until now, Chaktor had hardly passed up a single opportunity to let the transmitter guard, who had (in his view) grown soft due to his elite origins, feel the sting of his disdain. Now he was caring for him. A sign of his compassion—and of how desperate their situation was. The end was drawing near.

Rhodan's plan had stemmed from sheer desperation. From his inability to stand idly by even for a moment watching the death in the Vega system. He wanted to hand himself over and speak with the Topsidans, ideally with their leader, Genkt-Tarm. The aim was to keep him preoccupied long enough for his friends to secretly arrange their takeover of the ship. This delay tactic should give Thora and the others time to switch off key portions of the *Rugr-Krehn* and then strike from the shadows to steal control of the ship. The Arkonide battleship far outstripped the Topsidian units. If they could just get it on their side, they could force the end of the invasion. The mere threat of unleashing the *Rugr-Krehn*'s weapons would be enough.

But Rhodan was under no illusions. Thora's last alternative was the best outcome they could realistically hope for. The *Rugr-Krehn* would go down in a ball of flame, killing everyone on board.

In the tractor beam, the *Last Hope* disappeared into the Arkonide battleship. Everyone on board watched it in the form of a hologram that stitched together the recordings of the external cameras and formed an image that was like observing the events from a distance. But that mercy had not actually been granted to them; they were right in the middle.

The *Last Hope* vanished into the darkness as if into a cave sealed since the beginning of time that no ray of sun had ever found. *Or a black hole*, ran the thought through Rhodan's mind, *that gobbles up all the matter around it in space, devouring it, never to release it again.*

The all-encompassing darkness didn't remain. When the *Last Hope* was partway inside the hangar, the latter revealed itself as a vast space bathed in light that was almost uncomfortably glaring. Evidently, a light-absorbing energy field covered the open airlock. Robots and Topsidans were scurrying along the ground like tiny dots, small as insects scurrying in search of food.

Just like them, I'm nothing but a meaningless ant, or a worm wriggling around with my lies before being inevitably crushed.

What was he even doing right now? A bluff? That might have worked if he was sitting at home with Reg in Terrania playing poker, but when hundreds of thousands, even millions of lives were at stake? The fate of an entire solar system? How could he even be considering this nonsense? Surely it was pure hubris that could only lead to failure on a grand scale?

Suddenly, Thora was standing next to him. "Don't, Rhodan," she whispered to him. His breath wafted across his cheek, leaving a trace of moisture. "You cannot doubt. Not in front of our companions in this room and definitely not in front of the Topsidans you're about to be standing in front of. Forge ahead! Put on a brave face. If you crack inside, Rhodan, you're dead. Then we're all dead. We need you. *I* need you."

Thora may not have been human and may have come from another world far from his home, but her presence reassured Rhodan, and her strength of will lent him courage. When she was about to take a step away from him, he held her tight. His hand clasped her upper arm. She allowed it.

"I know," he whispered back. "And I also know that there's far more at stake than our own fates."

They exchanged a brief glance, the human and the Arkonide, and he felt deeply understood by Thora in a way he never had before since their first meeting on Earth's Moon.

Almost disconcertingly softly, the *Last Hope* touched down in the *Rugr-Krehn*'s hangar.

"I'll describe an environment to you, Tschubai," Thora said. "A maintenance room that will be situated next to the airlock."

"I'll have to jump twice to transport four people."

"Take Wuriu and me with you first," the Arkonide decided. "If needed, we'll clean and secure the room. Wuriu can also look

through the walls to see if there's anyone nearby. During that time, you can go back for Chaktor and Lossoshér." She extended her arms so the others could make the body contact needed for a joint teleport. "Well, we have no time to lose."

"Trker-Hon... Wise One." Genkt-Tarm, high commander of the Vega system invasion, entered the cell he'd had Trker-Hon taken to. A humble room, far too cold for the Topsidan to feel comfortable there. There was probably no place on the entire ship less comfortable, aside from the hygiene cells in the central recycling facility.

The prisoner was sitting on the floor with his lizard tail to the side and a blanket over his body. His back was resting against the bare wall. "You call me a Wise One? One who should be respected because he not only knows the Social Directives but is able to interpret them for application in everyday life?"

Genkt-Tarm came to a stop in front of the other man. He'd ideally have liked to have ripped that pretentious patch over the left eye from the man's head, or ensured that he went through the rest of his life completely blind. The old Topsidan had certainly earned it. Trker-Hon had defied him for all to see—had prevented Genkt-Tarm from shooting the Ferrons' Thort, who had roused his people to rise up against the Topsidans. That couldn't go unpunished.

But everything had its time, and things had changed. At this point, Genkt-Tarm was happy that the Thort was still alive. Who knew the ways in which the ruler of the Ferrons might come in useful? The high commander had had him locked away in another cell along with the strange pale woman called herself Anne Sloane. He would decide what to do with them later.

"Why have you come?" Trker-Hon asked. "What made you lower yourself to visit me in my cell?"

Genkt-Tarm didn't react to that. "Where did you get the blanket?"

“I doubt you’re here to waste your time on trifles like that.” Trker-Hon stroked the scaly skin of his face.

A soft scraping sound was reverberating from the naked walls. In Genkt-Tarm, this set off an involuntary sense of intimate togetherness with a female when the day’s work was done. With the sort of female Topsidian of which dozens were there when an important mission like this was successfully completed. They offered themselves to him, each one waiting for him to choose *her* of all options. Sometimes one could think they were only animals.

“Well?” said the Wise One, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Let me decide what I see as trifles and what I don’t.” It *was* a trifle, obviously, but when he asked something, the other man had to answer. That was the natural order of things. He was the commander, after all. “Think about the hierarchy on this ship. Where did you get the blanket?”

Trker-Hon shoved it off his body. The blanket was left in a scrunched up pile by his feet. “One of the guards gave it to me before locking me in here. Someone who knows what is due a Wise One.”

“I understand,” Genkt-Tarm said, and with a light touch of shame, he added, “He acted well. Now, let us move on to more important matters.”

“Have you decided my fate?” His voice sounded indifferent, as if the topic interested him less than the blanket they’d just been talking about.

“Not yet. But I want to show you something.” He pulled a small mobile player out of a pocket on his uniform and pressed a sensor button.

A voice could be heard—that of an alien speaking a few minutes earlier on an auxiliary craft they had almost destroyed. After a moment’s delay, a holographic image appeared depicting a form that was very similar to a Ferron, only paler. It reminded Genkt-Tarm of that Anne Sloane he’d taken prisoner on Pigell along with

the Thort.

"This is Perry Rhodan speaking. I have a message for Genkt-Tarm, the supreme commander of the Topsidan invasion fleet. We have what you are looking for. I repeat, we have what you are looking for."

Trker-Hon lost his indifference. He looked as though the words were a slap in the face to him. "That being is lying!"

"Is he now?" Genkt-Tarm asked. "Why would this Rhodan pass himself off as the legendary Lightbringer of the Ferrons? In his situation, a lie wouldn't make the slightest sense. He's on board an auxiliary craft that I'm having pulled into the hangar at this very moment. My soldiers will take him in. He doesn't have a chance. It must be clear to him that certain death awaits." The high commander added sentence after sentence almost automatically, wondering if this torrent of words was just an effort to reassure himself. For he was uncertain, and his position didn't permit uncertainty.

The Wise One regained his composure with visible effort. Did he know more? About these aliens—or about what they were seeking?

"This Rhodan, whoever he may be, is driven by desperation," Trker-Hon contended. "And hasn't he already achieved one success? You, Genkt-Tarm, would have destroyed his craft if not for this lie. Am I wrong?"

It was exactly as he said.

"And he's already managed to make his way onto the *Rugr-Krehn*," the Wise One continued with overwhelming logic. "What if he's planning to destroy the ship from the inside?"

"It flies in the face of all reason. He can't escape."

"Has that bothered the Ferrons who have acted as assassins against our troops, knowing just as well that they would die?"

The Topsidans' high commander slapped the floor with his tail. "He has no chance to even sneak out of the auxiliary craft!"

“I don’t find it probable in any case,” Trker-Hon assuaged him. “I only wanted to mention it. We cannot disregard any possibility.”

“But what if this being *isn’t* lying, Wise One? What do the facts say? The Vega system is a special place. *That is why we’re here.* This Perry Rhodan is likewise special. He resembles a Ferron, but he’s too pale and too tall. Granted, he looks quite similar to an Arkonide as well, but his hair doesn’t match and his eyes just as little. Above all, his emergence now. No Arkonide could boast such courage, such decisiveness. What if the legend of the Lightbringer is no legend? What do you think, Trker-Hon? You deal in legends, don’t you?”

“Rhodan is not alone.” Trker-Hon didn’t rise to Genkt-Tarm’s bait. “We’ve encountered multiple beings like him. And what about that Arkonide called Thora? So far we’ve found no explanation for her appearance.”

Genkt-Tarm emitted a derisive hiss. “Is it so far-fetched to believe that Rhodan’s words conform to the truth? We won’t find any answers without speaking to him. Thora has gotten away from us—under circumstances that remain unexplained.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Trker-Hon pushed himself up with his lizard tail and sprang to his feet.

For the briefest span of time, no longer than a single sweep of a nictitating membrane, Genkt-Tarm thought the other man meant to attack him.

“Did you think I didn’t know that Thora had disappeared?” the Wise One continued. “I almost lost my life in the process!”

“Under explained circumstances, yes! Has your memory of the incident returned, by any chance?”

“Obviously not! I’d have informed you straight away.”

“Can I trust that? I have had you incarcerated.”

“One has nothing to do with the other.”

Oh, really? thought Genkt-Tarm. *Do you truly think so unemotionally, Wise One? Can you draw such clear dividing lines?* He didn't articulate this doubt, however. "You're right. I had to put you under arrest, Trker-Hon, because you defied my authority and contravened my orders in an emergency situation."

"As a result, the Ferrons' Thort still lives, even if it must appear differently to his people." The Wise One adjusted his eyepatch; Genkt-Tarm briefly caught sight of the empty hole underneath. A slimy mass, perhaps a cooling gel, smeared the edges. "I'd do the same thing again."

"Brave of you to say that to my face."

"Do you doubt my courage? Or my candor? I stand up for our people, Genkt-Tarm, even if in a different way than you. I freely admit that without the military, we'd be lost—but the military…*you*…should remember the significance of the Wise One. The Despotate is not the measure of all things. But back to the matter at hand. What will you do with Rhodan?"

The soldier swept the blanket aside with a whip of his tail. "My first thought was to execute him. Publicly, as a sign for all to see. Similar to the Thort's case—only this time, I wouldn't allow any interruptions."

"But?"

"But I think I should decide otherwise. Certainly, it would be a death knell for the tradition of the Ferrons, who see him as the Lightbringer, lending them almost as much misguided hope as the wretched Thort!"

"Again: *but*?"

"There is a doubt deep inside me. I can't explain it. I don't want to act rashly. We can execute Rhodan anytime, if we see fit."

"We?"

"I," Genkt-Tarm corrected himself automatically. "Nonetheless, I have come to you because I want to hear your advice."

“My recommendations are twofold,” Trker-Hon said. “First, Rhodan can’t have come alone. Have his ship searched when he hands himself over.”

“You believe he’s hiding a task force?”

“What does belief count against military precision?”

Genkt-Tarm liked that. Maybe the man had only chosen the words to butter him up and win back his trust, but it didn’t matter. As long as the Wise One subordinated himself and took the place that the natural hierarchy ascribed him, the high commander would gladly count on his support.

“My second recommendation,” Trker-Hon continued, “is to have your troops cease fire. Call a temporary armistice across the whole system. It’s the same as with Rhodan himself. We can destroy the Ferrons anytime—but if we don’t do it, surprising new perspectives may reveal themselves.”

The Topsidian high commander silently mulled over these words. “You really are wise,” he said at last. “I will follow your advice.” He turned and left the cell. Outside, he turned around again. As before, Trker-Hon stood motionless in front of the cell wall. “What are you waiting for, Wise One? Come with me! Your place is by my side. Let’s meet this Rhodan and see what fate has in store for him and us.”

He was alone.

His companions had left the *Last Hope*. As planned, Tschubai had teleported first with Thora and Wuriu, then brought Chaktor and Lossoshér out of the auxiliary craft. The two Ferrons wouldn’t leave their hiding place on the battleship. The old transmitter guard’s condition didn’t allow for more. Meanwhile, Thora, Tschubai, and Wuriu would prepare the *Rugr-Krehn*.

He left the ship, which Wuriu had renamed from the *Tosoma X* to the *Last Hope* with a touch of gallows humor after the *Good Hope*’s destruction. Maybe this was all pure insanity. Maybe he’d only set

one foot inside the warship's hangar before a dozen beam shots cut through him. Maybe the Topsidans, under their leader, Genkt-Tarm, were already laughing themselves silly about his obvious lie.

But it was possible his poker game was working. He was ready for anything, and he'd adjust to new situations as long as a chance still remained. He wondered if it had been a mistake to predict their actions. They weren't humans, and beyond that, they looked more alien on the outside than every Arkonide and Ferron put together. And yet, they were...intelligent beings. People. Individuals. They followed rules they called the Social Directive, and which represented a certain ethos, whether or not it was comprehensible from a human perspective at first glance.

No one shot at him when he walked towards the soldiers waiting for him in the hangar. That was something. A Topsidan in a heavy battledress stepped over to him, weapon in hand.

"Who is still on board your craft other than you?"

"No one." Which wasn't actually a lie.

"Do you claim to have piloted it alone?"

Rhodan nodded. An involuntary gesture that the soldier surely couldn't understand. "You can gladly search the *Last Hope*."

The sound that followed, a mixture of hissing and barking, no doubt represented a kind of laughter. "My, how gracious of you, alien!" The soldier gave a wink, and an entire unit stormed the ship. "Now, follow me."

Rhodan complied and couldn't help noticing that the soldier was erring on the side of caution. Not only did a troop of six further Topsidian soldiers in heavy battledresses follow him at a distance of a few meters, but three combat robots also stomped over. The roughly humanoid models turned wide weapon barrels on him. They had to be of Arkonide construction.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

He expected to be ignored but was soon surprised. "Genkt-Tarm

is expecting you on the bridge."

"Your leader, in person," Rhodan said to keep the conversation going. "What rank did he have before, when Chrekt-Orn was still the high—"

"Silence!" the Topsidan shouted. "My assignment is to escort you to the bridge, no more and no less."

"But—"

"I can also knock you down and have you dragged the rest of the way by a combat robot if you wish. My orders were not entirely specific."

That was unambiguous. Rhodan fell silent.

Thora had told him about the structure of an Arkonide spacesphere of this size. The eight-hundred-meter giant had a three-shell design. They had landed in the hangar and were now crossing the outer shell. With the initial tension eased, it finally stood out to Rhodan that it had been empty. The auxiliary craft must have been lost or destroyed during the *Rugr-Krehn*'s takeover by the Topsidans. At least, he assumed that there had been armed altercations. Apart from that, this outer hull would include defensive shield generators and weapons systems.

Soon, they reached a wide corridor that led deeper into the spacesphere in a dead-straight line, into the middle shell. This took up the majority of the huge space and was, according to Thora, packed to the last centimeter with the transition drive equipment. Only a few maintenance ducts, passageways, and anti-grav shafts cut through the enormous technical components.

The path never seemed to end. Above all, the stamping steps of the battle robots pounded in the silence, a hammering, rhythmic staccato that threatened to drag Rhodan's thoughts along with it.

In the inner shell, on the other hand, lay the bridge and crew quarters along with everything they needed to survive in case of an emergency. Two fusion reactors for autonomous energy supply, the

inertial dampers and life support systems, sickbays, storerooms...

They had to have reached that area by now, since diverging paths sprang off on both sides at irregular distances. There were hatches in the walls, all of them closed. No one came towards them.

They prepared well, Rhodan observed. Anything else would have surprised him. *The Topsidans are careful. There won't be any unwelcome coincidences that could give me an advantage.* Apart from that, he also saw as good as nothing that let him draw any conclusions about how many Topsidans were on board, whether they were in full control of the ship facilities...or any of the myriad questions along those lines.

He wondered where his friends were by now. What if their little expedition was discovered? That would make his situation markedly more difficult. At the same time, he pictured the troop of Topsidian soldiers scouring the *Last Hope* and finding exactly what they were supposed to find: nothing. That was one of his few exhilarating thoughts.

They arrived at the bridge. Something glowing drew his gaze: a Topsidan who no doubt served as a pilot was standing among holographic control buttons. The intangible entry fields floated around him in the air, just as he'd first seen with Thora on the *Good Hope*. At the moment, the man was hardly paying attention to them. The *Rugr-Krehn* was presumably without propulsion right now, or on a stable course through the Vega system. This must have been where the tractor beam was enabled to ensnare the *Last Hope*.

The room's ceiling domed high above them in a decadent form surely granted only to the bridge. On the walls were strangely formed seats akin to troughs. These probably weren't part of the original Arkonide inventory.

Topsidans rested in two of these, half sitting and half lying. Both got up when Rhodan entered. When he showed no indication of walking over to them, the soldier pushed him from behind. Rhodan stumbled forward.

"Go!"

Rhodan complied. One of the two had to be Genkt-Tarm. It was good to be meeting him. It could change everything. The other...

The breath caught in his throat. It couldn't be!

The second wore a red patch over his left eye, secured with a rubber band. From that, Rhodan recognized him instantly. A chill ran through him. This was the Topsidan who had been shot by the Ferron Chaktor a few days earlier when they had freed Thora from the Topsidans' captivity on Rofus. The shot hadn't killed the lizard being. Filled with rage, Chaktor had been about to fire again, but Rhodan had kept him from unleashing a second shot. Killing this defenseless man would have been cold-blooded murder. Rhodan had even taken the time to see to the Topsidan's wounds.

And now this Topsidan, of all people, stood in front of him on the warship's bridge, next to Genkt-Tarm, the new high commander of the invasion? That couldn't be a coincidence.

"My name," said the Topsidan, "is Trker-Hon. I am a Wise One of my people, and I am serving as...a mediator between Genkt-Tarm and you."

He recognizes me, Rhodan thought, *but he's not letting it show. He's keeping it a secret that we've met once before.*

That gave an entirely unexpected twist to the discussion awaiting him. Now Rhodan was even less able to judge what lay ahead. Only one thing was clear: these moments would decide the fate of an entire solar system.

2.

In the Depths

August 6, 2036

Earth, on board the Tosoma

Crest da Zoltral closed his eyes for a brief moment and indulged in an illusion that everything was different. Then he rebuked himself. Taking refuge in games of make-believe was foolish, wasn't it? In the end, he'd be comparable to the Arkonides on board the *Aetron*, hardly aware of reality anymore because they were so absorbed in their fiction games.

He was indeed on the bridge of an Arkonide ship, but not one stranded on the Moon. This ship *was* stranded, but on the seabed of a planet whose inhabitants called it simply "Earth," as if no other planets existed in the entire universe. There, the *Tosoma* had rested for what had to be ten thousand years or more, half sunken into the mud and overgrown with hardy deep-sea plants.

And, most crucially, Thora wasn't on board. The one he loved as a daughter was dead.

Lesly Pounder rushed past Crest. The stocky, sparse-haired man had called himself "old," but with his age of fifty-five Terran years, he was, as the Arkonide had argued, in the prime of his life. At any rate, Pounder showed no signs of old-age infirmity. He seemed to be everywhere on the *Tosoma*'s bridge at once and radiated boundless energy. Now and again, he barked a few orders to the host of specialists who were hurrying around the ship as if through a wondrous dream.

They were children, Crest thought, and that was why the future stood open to them. Different from his people. For he had learned something: there were children who could change the world, and not only in dreams.

All of a sudden, Pounder did an about face, went past one of the control stations, and came to a stop in front of Crest. The Arkonide was resting in one of the old formchairs he had had brought to the bridge; his body needed more rest than he'd personally have preferred.

Lesly K. Pounder, the former flight director of NASA, crouched to meet him at eye level, a gesture the Arkonide found deeply moving. Pounder, of all people. The peevish, always-irritable bulldog, called "old dog" by his people when he was far enough away not to hear it.

"What's your assessment of the situation, Crest? You *are* getting full updates at regular intervals like I arranged, right?"

"Constantly." He'd lost count of how many times one of the specialists had come to him and pushed a pad into his hands. "You might say I'm drowning in them."

"A macabre way to put it here on the seafloor."

Crest smiled. His eyes began to water from inner excitation. "I hardly have any time left to take in the ship's condition myself once in a while. With my own eyes and my own hands, so to speak."

"Sounds like you need to make up for lost time." Pounder folded his arms in front of his chest and nodded. "How does...right now suit you?"

The Arkonide rose from his seat. "I can't think of a better time."

Pounder led him across the bridge with absolute self-assurance, as if the *Tosoma* were one of his own people's ships. And yet there was no arrogance or condescension toward Crest in his bearing.

Beavering away everywhere he looked were so-called "specialists" who weren't entirely deserving of the title when it came to extraterrestrial technology, but were nonetheless the most suitable men and women this planet could offer. Until recently, they had all worked for the humans' national space programs. Astrophiles who had defected to Perry Rhodan's side at the first

opportunity, just like Pounder himself.

From what Crest knew, Nevada Fields, the former control center of the American space agency, NASA, was empty and abandoned by now, as were its Russian, European, Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian counterparts. Practically all the employees had moved to Terrania to work on their grand dream—traveling to the stars.

Most recently, that dream had seen them cast down to the bottom of the ocean, literally farther away from the stars than they'd thought possible, and yet at the same time closer to space than ever before in their lives.

More than once, Crest heard laughter from these men and women who were (at the same time) well aware that the whole planet was in danger of falling to ruin. The Fantan's hunt for Besun threatened to escalate. Armed altercations had become the order of the day.

Nonetheless, a practically euphoric mood reigned on board the *Tosoma*. Everyone was working far beyond their limits, sleeping too little, overextending themselves completely. No one complained about it—for every one of them, just seeing the inside of such a spacecraft with their own eyes was enough to fulfill their dreams, let alone getting to work on its restoration and repair.

"The moment when the *Tosoma* rises up from the surging waves to fly out into space again isn't far off now," said Pounder. "We're already calculating the first simulations that should give us an impression of how the launch will go. It'll be anything but easy, though."

Crest nodded. "The ship is embedded in the seafloor. It won't let us break it free without issues. Without...consequences."

Pounder's countenance darkened. "The onboard Positronic is giving a gloomy outlook."

After a few hiccups, the ship's main computer now obeyed Crest fully, and on his instructions it was cooperating with the hundreds of engineers and mechanics who were tinkering with every part of

the ship.

“We’ll soon be ready to carry out the first ship-wide simulation,” Pounder continued.

“Of the launch?”

He replied with a nod. “Are you ready, Crest?”

“Me? What for?”

The “old dog” looked confused. He ran a hand through his sparse hair in a gesture that the Arkonide had never observed him do before. “Obviously, you’re leading the simulation as commander of the ship.”

“The commander should lead it,” Crest agreed. “No one can argue with that.”

“Then everything’s clear,” said Pounder…albeit only because he still didn’t *understand*.

“I see things differently.” Crest spoke louder so that his sonorous voice resounded across the entire bridge. “You are all magnificent men and women! This ship could wish for no better crew. Mr. Pounder did well bringing you on board.”

The former flight director cleared his throat and suddenly seemed to lose his self-assurance. Accepting open praise and compliments wasn’t among his strengths. “Thanks, Crest, we appreciate that you see it that way. That’s more than we deserve. Ultimately, you’re used to quite a different standard.”

“I am indeed.” The Arkonide smiled encouragingly. “Doubtless you’ve all heard reports or seen images from my ship, the *Aetron*, of the crew sunken into lethargy, and you know also that I’d be long dead if I had relied on them alone. Instead, I entrusted myself to the humans of this planet. The very fact that I still live justifies that choice in retrospect. I made the right decision, and I mean to repeat that.”

He fell silent, and time seemed to stand still across the entire

bridge. No one said a word; no one moved. All was completely still. Every individual there was waiting on Crest, hanging on his every word.

"The only thing this ship still lacks is a suitable commander."

That broke the silence. "But," Pounder objected, "I can't imagine anyone better than you, Crest. You're the right man to lead the *Tosoma*."

"You flatter me, Mr. Pounder, but you're wrong. I'm not the right choice. I'm old, and apart from that, there's a reason I was scientific director on the *Aetron* and not commander. If I had led the ship, everything would have been different, and not for the better. I'd be dead, contact with your people would never have happened, and Thora..." He cut off as the pain of thinking about his foster daughter suddenly overcame him.

Pounder proved himself astonishingly empathetic. "We don't know anything about Thora's whereabouts. Contact with the *Good Hope* was lost. That could mean anything—I feel it! Please don't grieve prematurely."

Crest blinked away the tears of emotion in his eyes. "You're good to me, Pounder."

"Concern is only natural."

Everyone on the bridge was still listening to their conversation as if entranced, even though it had long digressed into an area Crest hadn't anticipated. But it was too late to change that. He'd just have to steer the conversation back on course. "I've learned that nothing in the universe can be taken for granted as 'only natural.' That's why I'm grateful to you for showing such compassion."

The Arkonide drew himself up and took a deep breath.

"But whatever may have happened to Thora and the *Good Hope*, we have a task ahead of us. The *Tosoma* is humanity's only hope. It needs a commander who's tenacious, who can't be shaken by anything, and who acts when the time comes—not a ponderous old

man like me who loses himself too often in the labyrinths of his own thoughts. That's why there's only one possible commander for the ship: you, Mr. Pounder."

Lesly K. Pounder felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. Only the pain was missing. "You... You can't be serious, Crest."

"Do I look as though I'm joking?" the Arkonide replied. "You, Mr. Pounder, should be the *Tosoma*'s commander. Look around you! Without your tenacity, without *you*, none of us would be here on this ship today. You sent Perry Rhodan on a desperate mission to the Moon, thus doing exactly the right thing. You changed the destiny of your world and pushed open the doorway to the stars, even if you didn't take part in the *Stardust*'s flight yourself."

"Didn't that just bring disaster raining down on us?"

"No. Not at all." This voice came from somewhere behind Pounder. For the first time, one of the specialists had made themselves heard. This interjection led at first to isolated clapping, then to thunderous applause that echoed off the walls of the bridge.

Crest raised a hand and, like a solo performer on a stage, quieted the crowd with the tiniest of gestures. "I'd probably have long since died a pathetic death if you hadn't acted as was required, Mr. Pounder. The incredible technology that surrounded me on the *Aetron* didn't help me. The humans of this planet saved me and healed my illness. You never gave up on your dream of the stars—and now your dream shall be fulfilled!"

The applause thundered again. Pounder turned on his own axis once, and whichever way he looked, all the specialists bowed. *To him.*

Crest smiled—in his sober, good-natured way—and Pounder suddenly understood that this Arkonide was more of a mentor than an active spacecraft commander after all. Nevertheless, the former flight director was left speechless. Him, the man who never lost his composure!

He brusquely raised his right arm and wiped away the tears that had welled up in his eyes. “Yes, you’re seeing what you think you’re seeing,” he announced. “The ‘old dog’ is on the verge of losing his self-control! And yes, I know what you all called me when you thought I wouldn’t hear back at Nevada Fields. But my ears were everywhere—just as they should be for a future commander!”

The applause was renewed; it gained even more intensity when Pounder turned to Crest, initially shook his hand, and then, overcome by his own emotions, embraced him.

“Thank you,” he whispered into the Arkonide’s ear. The long, white-blond hair moved in the stirring of his breath before he released Crest again.

“You did the right thing,” Crest replied just as quietly. “And I thank *you*. The whole of humanity will thank you yet.”

Before the team’s acclamation faded, a woman stepped out of the crowd. She wore her black hair shorn to stubble. Her forehead bore a tattoo of a snake winding its body around a rock. “Captain...Captain Pounder. You should look at this.”

Despite directing her words at Pounder, she first presented the pad in her hand to Crest. Obviously, she was confused.

The Arkonide took it and cast only a brief glance at it. His already pale face grew even more sallow from one second to the next. “Based on this,” he said quietly, “we have no time left for simulations and predictions. If you want to hear my advice, we must start *immediately*.” Crest held out the pad. “Commander?”

3.

A Sample of Power

Vega system, on board the Rugr-Krehn

Thora hurried through the room, fleet-footed. Ras Tschubai had jumped with her again, this time into the middle of a secondary armory on the outer edge of the central sphere shell. It was well secured against conventional intrusions, but a teleporter could target it freely.

Just as they had hoped, the racks and wall brackets were still fully stocked. The Topsidans hadn't touched these reserves yet.

The beams of their chest lamps cut through the total darkness of the room. Thora's first step had been to secure Arkonide battledresses for her small field team; Tschubai had teleported into a supply room before the armory. However, he didn't look as though he could withstand the repeated strain much longer.

The Sudanese mutant was leaning back against the wall, breathing heavily, his hands resting on his thighs. Tears were streaming from his eyes. He lowered his gaze, trying to hide it.

Thora didn't overlook it, of course. As a commander, she was well attuned to precise observation of her subordinates. Her...crew. It was abundantly clear that Tschubai was reaching the end of his strength and could collapse at any moment. Even if he insisted otherwise, he'd be in urgent need of a break after this venture. If he didn't accept it willingly, she would order him.

She grabbed a carrying case with ten miniature explosives. These could tear open the *Rugr-Krehn*'s outer hull in several places and turn the ship into an unmaneuverable wreck. She also grabbed six heavy handguns, one for each of the "underground rebels," including Rhodan, whose progress she knew nothing about. She hoped he was still alive.

She secured the weapons to a magnetizable strap stretched over her chest. After a brief moment's thought, she made a timer controlled grenade the size of her fist disappear into a pocket on her suit. Then she hurried back to Tschubai and touched his upper arm to create the necessary body contact. "I'm ready."

He looked at her, and she drew back in shock. The whites of his eyes, usually glowing against his deep black skin, glimmered red. "Bloodshot" was an understatement.

No doubt noticing her horrified gaze, he wiped his nose with trembling fingers. "Doesn't look good, does it? The strain. Extreme pressure in my head. I feel like it's about to burst."

"Your nose isn't bleeding," said Thora. "It's your eyes. Can you jump?"

He nodded. "Back to the others. Then I'll take a rest."

The Arkonide waited. Nothing happened...except for the teleporter suddenly swaying. With a groan, he tipped forward, right into her arms.

She caught him and laid him on the floor. He was unconscious. That was just what she needed. Now she was stuck in this armory while the others were waiting for her return. Not only that, but she couldn't carry Tschubai with her. She was four decks above their current hiding place, eighty meters as the crow flies. Covering that ground without being discovered by the Topsidans would be a minor miracle. And by all the star gods this side of the Grand Imperium and beyond, she wouldn't and couldn't rely on miracles!

A sound made her jump. Heavy footsteps outside the hatch. Someone stopped by the entrance to the armory. She heard voices too muffled to make out individual words.

Thora raised her beamer. If need be, she would fight. She had no other choice. Every part of her tensed up, but the hatch didn't open. Instead, the steps disappeared into the distance again.

Thora closed her eyes for a moment, put the energy weapon

away, and bent over Tschubai. She activated a scan using the simple medical system integrated into her suit. It wasn't calibrated for humans, but probably general contact with humanoid races, at least. That would likely be enough to analyze his vitals.

Seconds later, she breathed a sigh of relief. Tschubai's biological functions were at a low but stable level. The stress of multiple teleportations had made him collapse, but it hadn't put him in mortal danger. That was something, at least.

Still, even when Tschubai came around, he'd hardly be able to teleport straight away. Her one and only option was to take the normal route back to their refuge. The requisite miracles would be supplemented by weapons fire if need be.

Thora leaned over the teleporter.

Trker-Hon, the lizard being with the eyepatch, came a step closer. It was as if he wanted to demonstrate what he'd already said: that he meant to play an intermediary role between the human and the Topsidian leader.

Perry Rhodan gave the "Wise One" his name, as he had once before. "Thank you for taking me in. You received my offer, then?"

The second Topsidan, Genkt-Tarm, confirmed this. "With great interest."

"It surprises me," Rhodan began cautiously, "that a member of your own people is supposed to serve as a mediator. Are you certain that you can judge neutrally, Trker-Hon?"

"I think you misunderstand the situation, pale alien," he replied.

"In my people's understanding, a mediator offers exactly the neutrality I mentioned," Rhodan explained. "But maybe we differ in this regard. Tell me something about yourselves. I'm eager to learn more about you and your people in general."

And more about what exactly you're looking for here, he added mentally. Trker-Hon had recognized Rhodan; there was no doubt

about that. Nor about the fact that he wasn't letting it be known. But...why? Was he ashamed of having been saved by Rhodan? Maybe that had far-reaching consequences in his culture. Maybe he felt indebted to his rescuer. But everything hinged unavoidably on a single, decisive question: why wasn't Trker-Hon giving Rhodan away as one of those who had freed Thora from her captivity?

He had neither the time nor the opportunity to ask these questions. He had to play the role demanded of him, present himself as strong and untouchable. "You won't say a word?"

"Put yourself in our shoes," the Wise One urged. "Would you reveal anything?"

"I only want to know who I'm dealing with. That's the only way I can understand who has descended on the Ferron people to wipe them out."

Trker-Hon went silent for a moment. Had this accusation hit home? Rhodan had exaggerated on purpose. The Topsidans were on a campaign of conquest; they were breaking all resistance with their iron severity, but there was no indication that systematic genocide was their goal. Did this one have a heightened conscience comparable to a human's? Again, Rhodan was painfully aware of how little he knew about his opponent. About their reasons for waging this war.

"As a Wise One, it is my duty to advise the military commander. Genkt-Tarm asked me to take part in this meeting, a request I was happy to oblige in the interest of my people." For a brief moment, his tongue was visible, then he rubbed the hard skin of his upper and lower lips together. "And in the interest of the Ferrons whose system we are securing."

"The correct expression is 'conquering,'" Rhodan said. "You have no right to invade this system. To destroy it. Or to murder." He knew he was making a harsh accusation. He had to see if it provoked any emotion in the Topsidans. Maybe they would only feel validated, or...praised. A ghoulish possibility.

"Per the Social Directive, life should be protected and only wiped

out when it is absolutely necessary," said the Wise One. "Exactly that applies in this case."

Rhodan thought back on all the horrors he'd been forced to witness. "It doesn't look that way."

"The Ferrons are fools," Genkt-Tarm interjected. "But whoever you are and whatever you purport to have, Perry Rhodan, I won't speak with you about the nature of our warfare. You must accept that or you'll be dead in less than ten seconds."

"You respect life, then." Rhodan breathed in deeply and crossed his arms in front of his chest. He hoped he hadn't gone too far. Naked fear sent a shiver down his spine. Hopefully it didn't show. Thora had been right, of course; he had to look self-assured at every second to fulfill his role.

Now the time had come to put the finishing touch on this little play. "What I purport to have?" he replied, picking up on the Topsidian commander's words. "I'm not 'purporting' anything! Do you really not understand, Genkt-Tarm? I'm the being that Ferron lore talks about, which I'm sure you're fully familiar with. I came to bring the light back to them."

"Empty words."

So empty that you brought me right here anyway: to the center of your power. He ignored the comment. "You don't have the slightest inkling of what I'm capable of. I hereby demand that the Topsidans leave this solar system while they still can. Because I respect life as well. I don't want you all to die."

Both lizard men fell silent. They came closer together and whispered to each other so quietly that Rhodan couldn't make out a single world. He had to stand there and wait.

Did I really just threaten them? he wondered, astonished by his own audacity.

At last, Genkt-Tarm broke his silence. "Give me one good reason why I should spare your life for a single second longer, Perry

Rhodan."

So much for my heroism. They'd called his bluff. He'd overplayed his hand.

It was always going to get to this point, but it was too soon! Thora and the others couldn't have made their preparations already. They weren't ready to take over the ship yet. Ras Tschubai wasn't about to teleport out of nowhere and save him. There was only one thing for it: he had to improvise. Just keep going.

"As you wish, Gentk-Tarm. If you kill me, millions of Topsidans are doomed to die. How many of you are in this solar system? Think it over."

The high commander pulled out an energy weapon. He slowly raised it until the muzzle was pointed at Rhodan's head. "If that's true, why don't you give us a sample of your oh-so-mighty power?" He extended his arm, aiming. "Go on. We're waiting."

Trker-Hon didn't like how the situation was escalating. But he couldn't intervene. Not again. It was too similar to the fatal moment when Genkt-Tarm had shot at the Thort.

Maybe it was for the best that this Perry Rhodan died. It was all too murky. Too *dangerous*. Genkt-Tarm couldn't find out that he'd lied about Thora's escape. Especially not in these moments when he was fighting with all he had to win back the commander's trust.

But..there was something special about Perry Rhodan, the Wise One had no doubt about that. Back in the Arkonide's cell, Trker-Hon would have died without the pale alien's help, if Perry Rhodan hadn't prevented the unknown Ferron from firing a second shot and then quickly seen to his wound.

What could have driven him to that? Was it the fundamental reverence for life in the tenets of the Social Directive? Or—the thought was so outrageous that the Wise One hesitated to even consider it—could this being actually be telling the truth? Could he really be the Ferrons' Lightbringer?

And now Genkt-Tarm was pointing his weapon at this mysterious Rhodan who had saved his life, and was ready to fire. “If that’s true, why don’t you give us a sample of your oh-so-mighty power?”

Trker-Hon didn’t doubt that the commander would shoot.

“Go on. We’re waiting.”

His hands were tied. He couldn’t do a thing but wait and see if Rhodan really did give a show of force.

He almost hoped he would.

Fighting to stay calm, Thora gained access to the systems of Tschubai’s battledress. That let her use its control armband to prepare a stimulant injection to stabilize his circulation, which the teleporter’s med unit then administered.

Tschubai came to, his whole body spasming, his face contorting. He opened his mouth, but only a tortured cough escaped his lips.

“Stay calm,” Thora said softly, smiling to instill confidence in him. “We’re safe. You just passed out.”

His breath raced. He pushed against the floor and sat up. “I... Please accept my apology.”

“Unnecessary.”

“I’ll immediately—” Another coughing fit interrupted him. Tears shot out of his blood-red eyes. “I’ll teleport us to the others.”

“You will do no such thing!” Thora countered in a tone that brooked no opposition. “If you try to jump again, you’ll pass out again—and this time it might leave you with lasting damage. Without you, we’d be lost, Tschubai! We’ll opt for the conventional way back.”

“But—”

“Tschubai, *I* am in command of this unit. You will gather your

strength to ensure you don't collapse again and follow me. If you manage that, I'll be more than satisfied. Understood?"

He hesitated briefly, then agreed.

"I know the ship's layout," Thora asserted, "and I know the shortest way back to our hiding place. First and foremost, in your condition, a battledress is too heavy to walk in. That means you will use the anti-grav function and float. I'll go in front and take your suit with me."

"You want to...remote control me?"

"'Remote' is out of the question. We'll stay close together. Eighty meters as the crow flies separate us from our destination. It sounds like a stone's throw, but we have to avoid meeting any Topsidans. The main problem is that our hiding place is four decks up. Which means we need to use an anti-grav shaft—which comes with a high risk of being caught."

"And if they do see us?"

Thora eyed him with a hard gaze. "We're armed, and ideally we'll also have the element of surprise."

"Even if we win a first engagement, the entire crew would know we're on board after that. Rhodan's bluff would be ruined, and we could hardly withstand a targeted manhunt against us."

The Arkonide released a handgun from her weapon belt's magnetic holster and passed it to the teleporter mutant. "Which is why we'll try not to get caught. And if we do, force is our only option. I won't lie to you, Tschubai. It won't work forever. But either the *Rugr-Krehn* will belong to us at some point soon...or we'll be dead anyway." She took a weapon for herself. "So, let's get going."

4.

Losing Immortality

Vega system, Planet Pigell

The heat incessantly drove the sweat from every pore of Darya Morozova's body, even though she felt as though she'd already sweated out every last drop of liquid eons ago. This despite the fact that she drank and drank and drank. The former Russian cosmonaut looked the lizard sitting across from her in his tiny eyes. Eyes nestled in rough, scaly skin that shimmered bluish gray in the evening light falling through the jungle's lush vegetation.

They were on their own. The Ferron resistance fighters had dropped them off in the jungle—far from the combat, as they'd hoped, with a promise that they'd take care of the humans and their prisoner. Since then, she'd heard nothing from them. The Ferrons must have been dead, having succumbed to the Topsidans' relentless military operation.

Chrekt-Orn, the Topsidan who had commanded the operation until his capture, stared back, unmoved. His gaze remained hard and unyielding, and yet Darya thought she was slowly understanding him and his people better. They weren't only cold soldiers who pillaged and murdered, bearing down on the Ferrons in the Vega system like birds of prey. *Not only that…but that too.* And therein lay the problem that had plunged an entire solar system with its many settled worlds into chaos.

A shrill cackling sound came from somewhere in the jungle, and a bird that barely stood out against the blue background of the sky flew past above them. It softly beat mighty wings whose red feathers rustled in the wind, each wing displaying a pattern that looked like a head-sized eye staring down.

Their spot somewhere deep in the jungle seemed endlessly far away from everything—even from their failure, if only Chrekt-Orn, the enemy leader they had captured, hadn't been there. Captured at

a staggering price: the Thort and Anne Sloane had been taken prisoner by the Topsidans; dozens or more Ferrons had lost their lives during their desperate endeavor. And she, Tako Kakuta, and Conrad Deringhouse had barely saved themselves, along with their prize, which was worth nothing. In no time at all, the Topsidans had named a new high commander: Genkt-Tarm. Chrekt-Orn didn't seem to interest them any longer. They'd bet everything—and lost.

But maybe there was still something to salvage. In discussions with Chrekt-Orn that went on for hours, Darya tried to learn more about him and his people, to understand their way of thinking. She was convinced this was the only way to get through to the Topsidans and end this war.

Thinking about that goal again should have made her laugh out loud. As if she had any way of changing anything. She was stranded on this appalling hot jungle world with Kakuta, Deringhouse, and their prisoner, far from home. Her real goal should have been surviving the day without falling victim to the hostile environment, dying of exhaustion, or being tracked down by the lizards.

Yet, she didn't give up hope. It was the only thing keeping her from lying down and shutting her eyes forever. That was why she *had* to succeed in bringing Chrekt-Orn out of his shell. Maybe by revealing more about herself.

"They say," she said to the alien, "when a child dies, its parents lose immortality."

The tongue briefly darted out of Chrekt-Orn's bulging mouth. *Or snout?* the Russian considered. The expression felt wrong to her, derogatory, as if the man were nothing but an animal.

"Immortality?" the Topsidan asked.

Morozova smiled dully. She was wearier than she'd ever been in her entire life, and she wanted nothing more than to sleep. For at least three days. To sleep—and maybe indeed to die, to leave everything behind forever, all this war around planets orbiting through space so far from her home.

“It’s a…sort of figure of speech. None of we humans are immortal, of course.”

Chrekt-Orn made a kind of rumbling; muffled noises that sounded menacing. His entire posture looked relaxed, however. “And yet you believe you lose something you never possessed when one of your offspring dies?”

“Not in a literal sense. But humans find comfort in imagining that part of us lives on in our children.”

The Topsidan was bent forward as far as his bonds would allow. His back was leaning against the trunk of a towering tree with blue and yellow fruits. They exuded a pleasantly sweetish scent, similar to a ripe pineapple. “So it’s a matter of religion, then,” he assumed.

“That’s not quite right. It’s about…” She paused. *About what? Vanity? Confidence? Sentimentality?*

“You yourself don’t know what this phrase is getting at?” Chrekt-Orn’s jaw moved as if he were chewing a hard leftover piece of the last meal he’d eaten. Which he was, for all she knew. She had no idea about his bodily functions. Wasn’t it possible that he chewed the cud, like a cow on Earth?

“What does having children mean to a Topsidan?” she asked.

“Your question surprises me. Why does it interest you?”

“I want to understand your people. And you.”

“Then you have come to the wrong person. I don’t have any offspring.”

“Nor do I.” She breathed out deeply, and the thought she associated with these words awakened an old pain she had thought long forgotten.

“That’s not everything,” said Chrekt-Orn.

She gave a start. “How did you…”

“I see it on your face, Darya Morozova. You sit here for hours at a time and speak with me. By now, I believe I’m able to read your mannerisms. I know how you think.”

In other words, you think you’ve achieved something I can only manage to a rudimentary degree at best myself? For a moment, she considered standing up and walking away. Why should she speak about it with him, of all people? Open herself up to *him*? She hadn’t spoken to any humans about this topic for years, but now with a Topsidan? With an enemy who was as inhuman as she could ever imagine?

And yet, there was something about him, about this...lizard, that led her to keep talking. “I had a child once.”

“It died?”

“On the day of its birth. Or...” She faltered. “The day before, in fact.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It was a girl.” Her fingers plucked a leaf off the ground and played with it; she noticed it in passing, as if observing a stranger. Her hands appeared to be leading an eerie life of their own. “Her name was Finya.”

The Russian couldn’t breathe any longer. She inhaled with her mouth wide open, trying to draw oxygen into her lungs, but her body refused. Stars danced before her eyes. It was so long ago now. She’d already overcome it! But in this moment, the pain returned, and with it, the love for the child she’d never seen laughing or crying.

“So, the child died when it was still inside your body?” Chrekt-Orn asked.

Morozova nodded. “Probably the day before the birth. On November 3rd. You... You won’t know anything about our calendar, of course, but...”

“Keep going.”

“On the next day, I brought Finya into the world. She was…dead. Do you understand? Her little heart wasn’t beating anymore.” *Why am I telling* him *this?*

The Topsidan leaned back. His hairless skull rubbed against the bark of the trunk. A spider scurried across his forehead and his protruding mouth area. He didn’t seem to mind. “You say, Darya Morozova, that you want to discover more about my people. Our women don’t carry the offspring in their own bodies. They lay eggs in which the next generation gestates.”

For a moment, Darya found this concept bizarre, even impossible. Then she realized there was a reason Chrekt-Orn looked as he did—like a lizard walking on two feet.

“We experience a bond with our offspring until after they are born that seems to resemble yours. If a nest is destroyed, it means unending pain. A loss of life that was closer to ourselves than any other. In that sense, I’m even starting to understand what you said to me at the start. A part of our own life really does die in that moment. It’s a clever idea, equating that to a loss of immortality.”

“I knew it,” Morozova whispered.

“What?”

“That you’re not as alien as you look.” She began to intuit the Topsidan’s mentality; at least, she thought she did. On the other hand, it was foolish to draw conclusions about an entire people based on one individual. Still, it was a beginning. The first step on a long road that might end in mutual understanding and fundamental accord.

“After our offspring hatch, however, we leave them to their own devices. They manage. Here, we differ from your people.”

“Even so…”

“Wait. I want to tell you something else.”

As happy as she was that he had opened himself up, she was also bracing herself for new inner pain. The old wounds were still

bleeding in her soul, and the love for the child she'd been granted so little time with bloomed as well. "I'm listening."

"If one of our offspring dies in the egg, we say that it isn't lost nonetheless. It *did* live, and it *did* matter—to the lives it had already touched and changed. A Topsidan understands that these tiny, unborn beings travel to the stars. By their own power, in a way that we don't grasp. They have one up on us."

The words pierced her right in the heart. "Star child," she said.

"How..."

"That's what we call our children when they die that early. Star children. Do you understand, Chrekt-Orn? It's the same idea for you and for us! It's about finding something beautiful in the darkness, and this beauty really exists! Do you believe... Do you believe that Finya journeyed to the stars and is still there to this day?"

"What I think doesn't matter. What do *you* believe? We Topsidans respect life, and we honor the memories of our deceased."

"So do we," Darya stressed. "And yes...I believe it."

Suddenly, someone was standing next to them. "You shouldn't spend so much time with him!" said Tako Kakuta in a cold voice.

Silence reigned for a moment. "That's my business," the Russian said at last.

Kakuta didn't agree with that. He'd watched for long enough. Whatever she had to talk about with the Topsidan, that was enough. Chrekt-Orn was a murderer. Of thousands upon thousands of Ferrons—and of Bechia Yuaad, the one Ferron whose life had meant more to him than his own.

"Let's not talk about it here!" he told Darya.

Chrekt-Orn shouldn't be hearing this. Without waiting for an answer, he departed back across the tiny clearing in the jungle

hellscape, at the edge of which they had set up their makeshift camp. If their refuge could even be called that much. In the heat and high gravity of this cursed planet, Pigell, every step was arduous.

Deringhouse, the last of their little group, had gone hunting. Typical of him, the pragmatist—he was working on their day-to-day needs. Kakuta himself would rather have foregone a meal. On the other hand, it was good that Deringhouse was there; missing one full meal wouldn't have been a problem, but by the second or third, even Kakuta would have started feeling queasy. The fruits on the trees were tolerable enough, sure, but overpoweringly sweet. Longer term, they desperately needed an alternative.

He only turned around when reached a few meters' distance away. The cosmonaut was following him, even if she didn't look overly satisfied. Leaving the prisoner alone was no problem; he'd never be able to free himself from his bonds without help.

"Tako?" She sounded anything but pleased.

"You have to be careful, Darya. He..." Kakuta searched for the right words.

"Yes?" she asked belligerently.

"He's on the verge of having you wrapped around his little finger!" No, those hadn't been the right words. But he couldn't do anything about it now.

Darya shook her head. "Are you even listening to yourself? You're talking nonsense! I'm not letting him 'wrap me around his little finger'! I'm trying to get closer to him, to understand him better—him and his entire people! We have to find out what drives the Topsidans. How they tick. Only then can we find the right foothold to—"

"Never mind," the teleporter interrupted. "I expressed myself poorly. I'm worried, Darya, that's all. What if he's trying to use psychology just like you are? But this monster is just lying in wait for a weakness on your side, and wants to use you to get himself

free. Just imagine if he succeeds! A moment later, we'd all be dead."

"He's not a 'monster,' Tako. That's exactly the point! He's a living being like you and me!"

Kakuta had to struggle to keep himself from yelling at her. *He killed Bechia!* he roared in his thoughts. He lowered his gaze and took a deep breath. A huge, fat beetle was scuttling over his feet. The chitinous shell gleamed in a putrid shade of brown. "Darya, you have to understand. They're attacking the Ferrons. Slaughtering them."

"And they killed the Thort. Which no doubt means that Anne's dead too." She nodded. "You feel guilty about Anne's death, right?" Before he could answer, she continued, "And I know that you're grieving for Bechia."

She knows. She knows exactly what I'm thinking about and what my damn problem is. And she's not above holding a mirror up to me. Tako smiled dully. "You're right about that. They're dead. All of them! And I'm the one to blame for it. Do you get it? Me!"

"That's not true."

"If I hadn't messed up—"

"Tako! That's. Not. True."

"Then go back to him already! Do whatever you want. I have to think."

Morozova came a step closer to him and extended her hand. "Ta..."

He didn't hear any more. He had teleported and now stood ten meters away, behind the wide trunk of one of the jungle titans whose crown arched far above him. Under his feet, little branches cracked as they broke; he had unwittingly materialized in a bush.

He had to urgently work on his teleportation gift. He needed to be able to target it better. Only, he couldn't stop thinking about

Chrekt-Orn. A short time earlier, the situation had almost escalated; he had come close to killing their prisoner, to punish at least someone for what was happening in the Vega system. Of course, Chrekt-Orn was no ordinary "someone," but the one who had led the invasion as high commander until they had taken him. That, conversely, had led to the Thort and Anne Sloane falling into Topsidian hands. And that *was* his fault. Whatever Morozova said, it didn't change the facts.

He didn't know what was worse: the despair over his failure or the rage that boiled inside him. It had been right not to kill Chrekt-Orn, of course, and to pass him into Morozova's custody instead...but what if this decision led to her doom as well? Could it really be that a war criminal like this Topsidan was sitting safely in their camp, restrained or otherwise, and facing nothing other than *conversation*?

From his new location, he watched as the Russian stood indecisively in place for a few moments, looking this way and that. She was looking for him, knowing of course that he had teleported.

"Think, Tako!" she called out, without being able to know if he was still close enough to hear her. "Running away solves nothing. It's cowardly, in fact. You're better than that."

Even though he had to agree with her, the words struck him deep inside. Maybe that's just what he was. Cowardly. Maybe he just wasn't cut out for adventure and...heroism in alien solar systems. What had determined that *he* should go off on a cosmic odyssey? His teleportation gift? He'd never asked for that.

Just then, Morozova turned around and took a step in the direction of her prisoner before abruptly stopping and pulling something out of her pants pocket. The small Ferron tablet computer that she'd received before their mission.

She tapped around on the touch screen. It looked as though she was going to hear the news or an incoming com transmission. Seconds later, she called his name again.

He came out of hiding and went over to her. "Please excuse me.

I…acted rashly."

She gave that no response. "You have to see this." She went through a few rounds of the touch screen again. "It happened two minutes ago, and it seems to have been broadcast live. The Ferron computer received the signal."

On the tiny screen, a picture of Perry Rhodan appeared. He was alive.

Tako felt overwhelming relief. But that couldn't be all. Clearly, Perry hadn't announced any particularly good news or Darya would have reacted differently.

In the next few seconds, he heard the offer Rhodan had directed at the new high commander of the invasion, Chrekt-Orn's successor.

"He has what the Topsidans want? What's that supposed to…" Tako asked, but what happened next interrupted him, leaving him speechless. A second com signal arrived, this time from a Topsidian source. It showed Rhodan's ship—however he had attained it—being pulled on board by the Arkonide battleship that was under the lizard beings' control. "Do you know what this means?" Kakuta asked. "With no other option, Perry bluffed. But the Topsidans took him prisoner. He's as good as dead."

"We don't know if he was bluffing. He could actually—"

"Have what the lizards want?" Tako laughed but without the slightest shred of humor. The sound held only bitterness. "How could he? And if so, why did he phrase it so vaguely? No, he doesn't know what he's talking about."

"We can't say that for sure, Tako!" Morzova abruptly turned around and hurried to the prisoner, who was still leaning against the huge trunk.

The teleporter considered whether he should head her off. She would play the recordings to Chrekt-Orn and get his…opinion. But was that wise? Wasn't it better to keep this information from the Topsidan?

Either way, Kakuta spent too long thinking it over. Morozova was already standing before their prisoner and holding up the tablet computer so that he could see the screen. Kakuta arrived just in time to see the end of the transmission a second time.

Chrekt-Orn didn't react any differently than he had expected. "Your leader has committed a grave error. The time has come for you to give up. Darya Morozova, you are a clever woman! Think it through."

"Be silent!" Tako ordered.

The Topsidan paid him no mind. "You see that you have no chance. Just as this Perry Rhodan, who claims to have been heralded by Ferron lore as their mystical savior, doesn't."

"Silence!" the teleporter demanded again.

"Give up and I'll ensure that you keep your life. Darya, you know that I possess the required power and influence. And you also know that I'm not lying to you!"

Kakuta pulled out the knife he wore in a Ferron belt buckle around his waist.

"Stop!" Darya snapped at him. "Put the weapon away!"

"He's lying to you! He wants to—"

"Think!" Chrekt-Orn cried. "You're all alone on an alien world! No one's going to help you. You're lost! I'm the only one who can make sure that—"

Darya stood in Kakuta's way, but he shoved her aside and put the knife's blade to the Topsidan's throat. "Shut your mouth!"

"The Tenth Clause of the Social Directive says: Always seek the truth. Direct your rage at the truth, not at he who speaks it. Respect him!"

"You filthy lizards! You're murderers! Beasts! I should—"

The cosmonaut grabbed his weapon arm and dragged it back. “I won’t let you do anything to him!”

“So you put him over me?”

“It would be murder, Tako! Chrekt-Orn is defenseless, and whatever he may have done before, right now he’s no more than—”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Darya!” Tako’s right hand grasped the knife’s handle tighter, while his other hand flew forward and grabbed the Topsidan by the throat. He felt the dry, rough scales...

...and teleported with Chrekt-Orn.

First Interlude

The Gobi Burns

Ground steeped in history, *Ivan Goratschin thought as he looked into the flames. Not long ago, this little hill in the middle of the Gobi Desert had been completely meaningless. One among many.*

But that had changed. Right here, in the middle of nowhere, the American astronaut Perry Rhodan had ripped the flag off his uniform and let it fall to the ground without a second thought. A sign that the world had changed, that everything had been turned on its head, that the labor pains of a new era were beginning. For the new was only ever brought forth among pain, just as a baby only glimpsed the light of the world among the suffering of its mother.

For Ivan, these labor pains meant that he had done it again. Raging flames blew every which way, bathing the Gobi in fire. The time had come. The sand melted. And the Fantan spacecraft...

"Ivan," Ishy had said with a smile that morning, a few hours earlier when she had finally woken up next to him. Her dark hair had gleamed first on the pillow and then on the naked skin of her upper body when she sat up. "Ivan, whatever you say now, it won't change anything between us. I love you." She fell silent for a moment. "Have you decided?"

He nodded. It made no sense to put it off any longer or to hide it from himself. "I have. And I'll do what has to be done."

With the power of his mind, he had unleashed a murderous explosion. He had unleashed the death that resided in his head. The desert burned. The heat flared all the way to him on the hill. The brightness was so intense that even now, with the sun still in the sky, a pattern of light and shadow flickered across Ishy's face. In her eyes danced tiny reflections of flames and death.

"I can't keep watching as the Fantan defile the Earth," Ivan had said. "Almost everyone is powerless against them, but not me. That

gives me a responsibility whether I want it or not."

Ishy put her pale arms around him. Her skin was cool from the fresh morning, yet she warmed him. "We know what you can do."

And so they had come here to set a beacon. To teach a lesson to the extraterrestrials who had taken their hunt for spoils too far.

Ivan and Ishy climbed the hill near Terrania where Perry Rhodan had ripped off his flag. A symbolic, deserted, sullied place. During the siege of the *Stardust*, General Bai Jun had set up his command tent here. The Chinese army had placed extensive installations on the hill, and when they had finally withdrawn, a bizarre, desolate moonscape had been left behind: abandoned trenches in plowed-up ground, bunkers in exploded rock. It was a ghostly place, but his vague fascination paled in comparison to the view it offered the two walkers as they cast their gazes into the distance. And into the sky.

The gigantic Fantan ship towered before them, a colossus of unimaginable scale. Even the ever-growing city of Terrania looked like a nondescript anthill next to it.

"Ishy," Ivan said in a flat voice.

"I know. We knew the Fantan would be a threat. Even a terrible threat. But the reality is far worse than that."

"That ship is..." He stopped. There was no word for this leviathan that outstripped anything he could have imagined. It began far below them, at the foot of the hill, and ended...somewhere up there, almost disappearing into a haze that he otherwise hardly noticed. It was simply too high, and they were standing too close, to appreciate the Fantan craft in its entirety.

And yet far enough away that they wouldn't be dragged into death themselves.

Ishy took his hand.

Stepan and Artyom, Ishy's friends, the resistance fighters, had stayed behind. They were preparing everything for the moment when Ivan lit the beacon that would make clear to both Fantan and

human that things couldn't go on this way any longer.

"Are you having doubts?" she asked. Her voice was soft.

He wavered, then nodded. "I thought I'd already decided. I thought I knew what it meant, but I'm now here, and..."

"I know." She kissed him. "I understand you. I'm *different*, just like you."

"Not like me. Your gift doesn't kill."

She pursed her lips into a thin strip, bloodless and colorless. "Don't be deceived," she said at last. A tear glimmered in the corner of one eye. "Everything's ready, Ivan. Everywhere in the world, people are waiting for a sign to strike out. It's boiling up, Ivan—everywhere. You can show them that we're not defenseless."

Ivan hesitated. He couldn't shake off the feeling of déjà vu. Hadn't he been used once before? No. This time was different. Ishy wasn't Clifford Monterny. Not in any respect.

"You're worried about Stepan and Artyom, aren't you? They're not the purest beings that have ever walked the Earth. I know that. But we're all only human. We're all fallible. We all only want the best. Stepan and Artyom aren't important. You are, Ivan. You'll set the example that unleashes the storm! This world's inhabitants will see you as their leader, leading them to freedom!"

Ivan contemplated. It didn't feel right. He didn't want to be a leader, to stand center stage. He had to find himself first, with...yes, with Ishy's help? At her side? If only his brother were by his side to help him. But Ivanovich was dead.

Dead...

He felt Ishy's cool, tentative fingers on his cheek. He turned his head and looked at her.

"Ivan, I sense your doubt. Look here."

"No, Ishy, I..."

She silently shook her head and activated her gift, which was no less uncanny than the one Ivan possessed. Only, hers was harmless. It didn't cause devastation.

An image appeared on the abandoned hill in front of the two humans, reflected from Ishy's mind. It showed a scene that was playing out at this exact moment somewhere in the world.

An old man was standing in front of a crooked hut. He had shabby clothes and long, matted hair. In his hand, he held a firearm that looked almost like an antique, a weapon that no doubt came from his father or grandfather. His dilapidated house shook, quaked in its foundations, then separated from the ground with a crack. The man raised his gun and fired in a senseless gesture at the Fantan flounder floating above the ghostly scene. When the hut began to rise into the air in an anti-grav beam, he clung to the door, losing his grip many meters up. Limbs gyrating, he plunged to the ground, collided, and lay there in a contorted pose.

Power, Ivan grasped more clearly than before, means responsibility. And he had the power to stop this horror. More than that—it was his duty.

As the image from Ishy's mind faded, he acted. The pitiful dead old man appeared to be swept away in a whirl of fire and light that surged up behind him, and yet it had nothing to do with him.

Ivan Goratschin *ignited.*

Since then, the Gobi burns. Since then, explosions shred the vast, noble silence. Since then, tongues of flame blaze ever higher.

In the anthill of Terrania, were the humans also screaming and running and burning, like the Fantan? The city of the future was simply too close; perhaps it had thus been destined to go under with the Fantan ship—a horrible, bizarre, mocking fate. What if the tech inside the ship exploded as the flames ate away at it? Or if the colossus accelerated to escape the destruction, and plunged onto Terrania's outer buildings while blazing?

Ivan closed his eyes.

But the images of the flame didn't disappear.

Perhaps they'd never disappear again.

5.

Out of the Flood and into the Flames

August 6, 2036

Earth, on board the Tosoma

"Commander?"

Crest held the pad with its explosive information out to Pounder, who took it and cast a glance at it. It was undoubtedly clear to him in an instant that a momentous decision was needed just ten minutes after he had taken over command of the *Tosoma*, a near-wreck that had likely been stuck many meters deep in the seabed for ten thousand years.

The Arkonide considered what he had just seen: footage of the Gobi Desert burning, and the Fantan ship towering up out of the chaos. There had evidently been an attack, and regardless of who had initiated it, things had now gotten serious.

Crest managed to look at the small, dully glowing display in Pounder's hands. The *Tosoma*'s new commander selected a symbol representing a text communication. It informed them that a nuclear explosion had occurred a few kilometers from Terrania. However, the flames had already blazed for far longer than an ordinary nuclear explosion, as if they were continually being set off anew, and they were concentrated around the aliens' spindle ship. No one knew the specifics yet, but many saw the city, whose devotees symbolically called it "the gate to the stars," as already lost.

However, Crest knew the enormous extraterrestrial ship wasn't right next to Terrania. This was merely an optical illusion; the spacecraft's dizzying height made it look from some surrounding angles as if it practically touched the city's outermost buildings. This had led to false reports by the media.

The people of this planet couldn't accurately estimate the

position of a colossus like that in a desert environment. They weren't used to seeing objects of that size, let alone comparing them to others. In reality, the spindle ship had landed several kilometers away from Terrania—though this was still much too close if the ship exploded or if a war broke out at its position after this first surprise attack.

After a few seconds, Pounder gave a weighty order. An order that would unleash a catastrophe. A *necessary* catastrophe. Crest would have taken exactly the same action.

"Get everything ready for launch! Not a simulation. This is the real thing!"

Frantic activity broke out on the bridge at once. Pounder breathed deeply and closed his eyes, thus demonstrating that he understood one of the key principles of command in an emergency and was ready to apply it systematically: delegating and relying on the abilities of his subordinates.

Double-checking their actions, or telling each individual what to do, was simply not possible. But in any case, they knew their way around their own stations better than he did.

In this case, everything had been set up for the simulation. A test of the real launch—which they now had to skip. Life had left them no time for theorizing and careful preparation. Quick action was required.

"Crest," said Pounder, "I need your advice."

The Arkonide looked at him seriously and tried to appear confident. He could guess what was afflicting the other man. Making tough decisions *was* part of a commander's lot, but it wasn't something they could usually manage directly after taking the post. And this was a *very* tough decision indeed.

"Gladly," said Crest. He would do whatever was in his power to support Pounder.

Pounder turned to his team again. "Report as soon as everything

is ready!" Following those words, he turned back to the Arkonide and lowered his voice. "When we launch and the *Tosoma* comes loose from the seafloor, we'll set off an earthquake. The ship is buried too deep and too...entangled with its environment for us to avoid that. In addition, the *Tosoma*'s volume is so large that it will cause a tidal wave when we rise up and break out of the water. Crest, can I really—"

"That's all true," the Arkonide interrupted. "But you know that you *must* launch. You've already ordered it, and it's set in stone now that whole hosts of specialists are inspecting and preparing everything. What alternative would there be, Mr. Pounder?"

The former NASA flight director audibly gulped. He did not avoid Crest's gaze. "There is none. The only question is whether it happens now or in a few hours, or maybe even days."

"Your only choice is whether you'll at least *try* to fend off the far bigger catastrophe that's just begun in the Gobi." Crest felt tired. He wanted this planet, which had become his salvation, to find freedom, but it looked a distant prospect. The inhabitants still hadn't found their way to it themselves, the way to planet-wide cooperation, and the arrival of the thieving aliens had made everything worse.

"Whoever decided to try attacking the Fantan in this way," Crest continued, "has made a grave error. The footage shows that the ship survived the first attack, apparently unscathed. The fire won't penetrate its outer hull and shields. The Fantan, however, will soon strike back, I have no doubt about that. It's not in their nature to allow this behavior from their chosen Besun. Their ship may only be a sparsely weaponed large freighter, but the humans have nothing that could measure up to it. *Apart from the Tosoma*. Let me ask you a question, Mr. Pounder. Which city will the Fantan wipe out first? Terrania? New York? London? Berlin? Hong Kong? It doesn't matter, because afterwards, Earth's surviving great powers will fire their nuclear weapons to defend themselves. This world will be doomed."

"Maybe it'll all turn out differently. My people's leaders might be more reasonable than that."

“Do you think so?”

No. He didn’t believe that; it was clear on his face. Besides, every one of his words so far had shown a realistic assessment of the situation.

“Thanks, Crest!”

“What for? I only told you what you already know.”

“We humans are a strange bunch,” Pounder replied. “All too often, we know things, but we don’t act in a way that matches that knowledge. It’s pretty crazy.”

“No. It’s...normal. I can’t say Arkonides aren’t guilty of the same.” After a short pause, Crest added, “Unfortunately.”

The *Tosoma* quaked. A deafening groan rang out through the bridge.

Pounder stood surrounded by holographic control panels and felt almost unnaturally calm. He was doing what had to be done. He gave orders, and the ship jerked and shook like a waking leviathan burrowing out of the mud.

Anyone who wasn’t fulfilling some urgent task on the bridge had long since left it. The onboard Positronic had indicated every last remotely safe place on board—as safe as any place *could* be given the situation. The probability of the ship’s hull tearing apart as they attempted to free it was more than fifteen percent. An acceptable risk when it came to saving the world.

A spacecraft always had a certain residual risk, even when it wasn’t flying in space but had sunken into the sea millennia earlier. That was less problematic to Pounder than the natural disaster their launch would set off.

He had directed the Positronic to proceed as cautiously as it possibly could so as to minimize the consequences. Still, a ship the size of the *Tosoma* couldn’t come loose *softly*.

The inside of the ship boomed like a bell, as outside, ancient buildups of sludge and limescale cracked off of the hull. The power units screamed as if alive—a nerve-racking, bone-grinding sound.

And neither Pounder nor anyone else on board could do anything except enter commands into control instruments...and hope. He heard one of the men on the bridge praying. The words moved Pounder in a unique way, but seconds later, he wasn't paying attention to it anymore. Crest, meanwhile, was watching columns of data showing incoming readings.

A hologram reproduced their surroundings. Spotlights cut through the inky blackness of the deep sea. In the cones of light, bizarre-looking fish of the kind Pounder only knew from elaborate picture books and horror movies hurried about; they really did look like monsters that few human eyes had ever seen. There were increasingly fewer of them, though, as the *Tosoma* shook about and shockwaves chased them away through the undersea realm.

Whatever can flee has fled. Instinct commanded the animals. Only the humans and Arkonide sat tight. For better or worse, they were at the mercy of the ship, shielded from certain death only by the hull.

Pounder suppressed the unease that came with that thought. As trapped as he felt, it was purely psychological in nature. He had always dreamed of flying to the stars—and it didn't make the slightest difference whether the hull broke in the deepest depths of the sea or the far reaches of space: both were synonymous with death. The only question was whether he'd drown and be battered by the incoming torrents or suffocate in a vacuum. Either way, humans were dependent on the technology that allowed them to undertake journeys that had been unimaginable a short time ago. A tradeoff Pounder was well ready to agree to.

In holographic form, he saw the ship's outermost layers as they rose from the seabed. A crack ran through the ground, water swirled, and dark particles of matter that he couldn't identify formed impenetrable clouds in which the spotlights glistened into nothing. It was like a black fog that fell over everything—a shroud spreading across this inhospitable world in ghostly silence.

The thundering grew quieter; the metallic creaking increased. The bridge's floor bucked and tilted as if it were about to topple over and change places with the side walls.

"Don't worry," said Crest, though he didn't sound as confident as his choice of words would suggest.

The hologram showed nothing anymore, just a whirling darkness formed of raging contaminated torrents. The strong light from the ship only reached a few meters now. A large, dead creature suddenly floated through the residual light, a kind of octopus.

"Hull is undamaged!" someone shouted over the remaining noise. Anderson, perhaps? Pounder couldn't place the voice. He was trying to keep what felt like thousands of indicators on the holo-display in view at the same time and interpret them. His breathing was heavy, yet he felt an increasing sense of calm and serenity. That was a relief; a commander needed to stand above things to a certain degree, to be able to observe them in a sober and objective way.

The *Tosoma* was free now, and it had gone more smoothly than he'd feared. Pounder set a course that led them upward, going as slowly as possible to reduce the tidal wave they'd unleash with the displaced water.

They ascended.

Pounder thought of the divers who had delved to ever deeper reaches of the ocean in centuries past. Submarines, capsules. Despite all the advances in technology, large portions of the seafloor were still among the last unexplored regions of the world.

Humans believed themselves to have gone everywhere, to know every speck of habitable space. By now, it was evident how foolish that thought was. Those who, like him, were obsessed with space, had always known it. Exploring the Earth was only the first step. The clumsy, tentative attempts of a small child letting go of its mother's hand as it tried to walk.

With a ship like the *Tosoma*, far more stood open to them.

Infinitely more. It was the fulfillment of a dream. Travel to other planets in distant solar systems—to *inhabited* worlds, as had been shown recently.

That great dream was changing into reality. All his life, Lesly Pounder had kept the hope alive inside him but had seen this hope as nonsense, as a vestige of childhood fancies. And now he sat in an artifact of extraterrestrial technology that had been stranded on Earth and had made it flightworthy with a team of the most capable people.

They were a few hundred meters under the ocean's surface now. The propulsion units were pushing the gigantic steel construct upward. Its enormous volume displaced masses of water, shoving them up, to the side, farther down. Waves formed, billowing forth, and no one, not even the Arkonide Positronic, could calculate exactly what devastating consequences the *Tosoma*'s ascent would bring with it.

Pounder didn't want to think about that. They were proceeding as carefully as possible. They had chosen the lesser evil in order to keep the Earth from plunging into the chaos of a devastating war.

Meanwhile, Crest followed the latest news from the Gobi and its effects across the world on a pad. He gave the commander a brief report. The fire in the Gobi was still burning; the desert floor blazed even though there was no longer anything there to ignite. The alien ship appeared unaffected, and there had evidently been no destruction to speak of in Terrania either.

"Everywhere in the world," Crest continued, "there are more and more battles breaking out. As feared, the attack on the mothership has been seen as a kind of initial spark. The humans are rebelling against the aliens' auxiliary craft flounders, trying to shoot them down or blow them up. Except for a suicide venture in which a helicopter filled with explosives crashed into a Fantan craft, not even one attempt has been successful, apparently. And I don't see that exception as a victory."

Pounder had to agree. An act like that was a sign of sheer desperation.

The surface approached. For a while now, the hologram of the external cameras had stopped showing the darkness of night. At this depth, sunlight illuminated the water. Blurrily, yes, but life-giving.

Total silence reigned. Everyone on board seemed to be holding their breath. Then the *Tosoma* finally broke through the waves. Water poured along the metallic sphere, plunging down before splashing up in vast fountains. Somewhere, someone applauded.

“I’m taking us to the Gobi,” Pounder announced. “We’ll go up into the upper layers of the atmosphere. There’s no time to lose. I’m opting for the maximum speed we can currently sustain.”

Five minutes later, he could vividly imagine the image that was spreading across the worldwide net by now: the sphere of the *Tosoma* racing across the sky like a shooting star, making for the Gobi so quickly that the frictional heat made the air glow.

6.

Caught

Vega System, on board the Rugr-Krehn

The hatch to the armory shut behind them.

Thora scouted the corridor. No one was nearby, just as the battledress's readings had suggested. They floated forward, slightly off the ground. *As quiet as star ghosts,* she thought.

Eighty meters separated them from their goal, from the hiding place where the others were waiting, which offered a modicum of safety. A pathetically short stretch. At the suits' full acceleration, they would have already been there by now. Only, they weren't outside, but in a spacecraft, and in hostile territory besides. They couldn't risk being discovered.

Ras Tschubai stayed close to her. As she'd told him, she was using parallel control to take his battledress along with hers. He could release himself from it anytime if a skirmish broke out and he needed more freedom of movement. If all went smoothly, however, this would let him rest, as his stricken body so badly needed to.

They floated along the passage. No one came the other way; no Topsidans were there to catch them. The armory was twenty meters behind them now—by far the easiest stretch of their journey.

They had activated the suits' stealth functions, which made the battledresses automatically match the colors of their surroundings. It wasn't invisibility, which still eluded Arkonide scientists after millennia of research, but a form of camouflage that might save their lives. From a distance, or to an observer who wasn't expecting to see them, they wouldn't stand out.

They stopped at an intersection. She wished Wuriu Sengu had accompanied them. His gift of seeing through solid matter could have shown them what awaited them beyond the corner.

She shooed away those superfluous thoughts. She couldn't change anything about the situation anymore, and an additional companion would only have made teleportation even more difficult for Tschubai.

In the middle of the Arkonide spacecraft's spherical shell, there was too much interference to get a reliable picture more than a few meters away with the suits' scanners. The passage crossing theirs, however, stretched in a direct straight line in both directions as far as they could see. They had to take a left to get to the closest anti-grav shaft, which would bring them three decks up.

Thora briefly sought eye contact with Tschubai. The teleporter, still at the end of his strength, nodded in confirmation. No more was needed. Every wasted second increased the risk of discovery.

Together, they floated into the crossing, weapons in hand, ready to fire.

All was quiet. No one caught them. She heard the teleporter sigh in relief over the helmet com, which they'd linked with each other on a shielded frequency.

"Keep your nerve," she whispered to him. "If we're noticed, we'll have to act quickly and decisively. I need you, Tschubai."

While speaking, she had already floated on again. Five meters from the crossroads. Ten. They stopped in front of the anti-grav shaft. They had to ascend three decks. Another ten meters, with three times the danger of being caught.

Thora peered into the shaft. It was a seemingly empty tube, a steep drop into a chasm that cut through the ship vertically with no apparent end. Entering it, however, would let you feel the anti-grav effect; you'd either float downard in a slow, controlled manner, or be pulled upward, depending on which polarity you entered.

No one was using the shaft as far as she could see at a glance. Could they really be so lucky? Was the miracle coming true—would they be able to avoid resorting to weapon fire? A tantalizing hope.

She didn't hesitate for long and pulled Tschubai with her via the suit controls; its integrated Positronic reacted to every one of the Arkonide's movements.

They could have ascended with the help of their battledresses, but they simply floated in the shaft's normal anti-grav effect. The less they used their technology, the lower the risk of the Topsidans happening to detect the inevitable emissions and sound the alarm. Their enemy still didn't suspect the danger that threatened them from the shadows, but the abandoned *Last Hope* had to have raised some doubts.

The first exit appeared above them. They passed it without incident. The second opening. Nothing. Then the third, a little under two meters above their heads.

A Topsidan entered the shaft.

Not even two meters separated them from the lizard being. He was wearing a battledress.

The Topsidan snorted; he wasn't deceived by their suits' stealth function. His hand raced toward the activation sensor for his defensive shield.

Thora acted immediately. Her beamer shot pierced the alien soldier in the abdomen and cut straight through his ribcage even before his shield came online. The Topsidan died. Blood gushed out of the wounds and floated next to the corpse just as weightlessly as the body itself, pulled upward by the anti-grav beam in the shaft.

By now, Thora had already closed the last few meters to the exit with a quick thrust from her suit. She wasn't a soldier; she wasn't used to killing. But she suppressed the horror that threatened to wash away her clear thinking. If the Topsidan hadn't come alone, his companions couldn't be allowed any time to raise an alarm. Their actions had to be quick and decisive. And deadly. Otherwise they were lost.

To her relief, Tschubai acted astonishingly effectively. "I'll deal with the corpse!" he called to her over the com. His voice trembled.

Weapon at the ready, the Arkonide jumped out of the shaft and checked in all directions. The exit was easily reachable from an intersection. No one was visible. The soldier had been alone.

She heard a sound behind her and whirled around.

Relieved, she lowered her weapon as she saw Tschubai, who was dragging the dead Topsidan out of the anti-grav shaft. He was groaning. The strain was almost too much for him. She grabbed hold of the corpse as well; thanks to the suit's strength enhancement, carrying it presented no difficulty. Her companion didn't know his way around this product of Arkonide technology as well as she did. For him, wearing one of these battledresses was anything but everyday. To Thora, it had often felt like a second skin. After a while, she forgot that it was a piece of equipment weighing almost fifty kilograms.

"He's not bleeding anymore. The heat sealed the wound." The teleporter looked around hastily. All color had drained from his face. "Quite...quite apart from the fact that we murdered him, the blood that did spill is still floating upwards in drops."

"We don't have time to deal with that. It will soon reach the top and escape notice for now." Admittedly, Thora wasn't fully comfortable with leaving it, but being caught so close to their goal was a far, far greater risk. They'd have to risk someone in the shaft happening to see the drops of blood.

With the corpse in their arms, they made their way towards their hiding place. Now that Thora had time to think about the last few minutes, she felt cold inside. She'd had no other choice, but understanding and feeling were two different things, and in retrospect, the feeling prevailed.

The horror.

"Well?" Genkt-Tarm, the new high commander of the invasion of the Vega system, was still aiming his beamer at Rhodan's head. "We're waiting for a sign of your oh-so-mighty power."

Rhodan felt tiny beads of sweat forming on his forehead. “You’re committing a grave error.” He noticed himself how laughable these words sounded. Hollow and without substance, the last weak attempt of an animal driven into a corner. He was already as good as dead, and he couldn’t do the slightest thing to change that.

“I think we’ve heard enough. Don’t you agree, Trker-Hon?”

“I’m not so sure,” replied the Wise One, who had introduced himself as a military advisor and as the mediator in this discussion. “The Ferrons believe Perry Rhodan is the Lightbringer from their lore. He’s a symbol to them.”

“One more reason to kill him.”

“He could be more valuable to us alive than dead,” Trker-Hon argued. “We shouldn’t be too hasty.”

He’s trying to protect me, Rhodan recognized. *To help me, as I saved his life in Thora’s cell.* Or was he interpreting it wrongly? Was this line of thought too human to pertain to a Topsidan?

Genkt-Tarm came closer and held the weapon’s muzzle right up to Rhodan’s forehead. A shiver ran down his spine. He was afraid, and nothing could change that; his service experience didn’t help, nor the fact that this wasn’t the first time he’d been in mortal danger. He was helplessly waiting for death, completely and utterly at the mercy of his alien opponent. The only thing he had left was time to think, and that only deepened his fear.

Or should he gamble it all on one card and attack Genkt-Tarm? The latter stood close enough that he could definitely dare an attempt. Duck, deliver a targeted blow to the Topsidan’s throat, make a desperate escape from the bridge…

But it was futile. Maybe if it were an untrained opponent holding a weapon for the first time, he could have blindsided them in this manner, but Genkt-Tarm was doubtless anything but that. No one reached the leadership post of an armed force spanning an entire solar system without combat experience. Aside from that, there were a dozen more Topsdians on the bridge. They wouldn’t stand

idly by while Rhodan knocked their commander down and fled.

A moment later, Rhodan felt a sharp pain. Everything spun before his eyes; the world jumped around and shook.

So that was death.

The last experience.

The end.

Except that "the world" consisted solely of the *Rugr-Krehn*'s bridge, and it really was shaking.

Perry Rhodan was still alive.

He was lying on the floor. He'd fallen hard and hit his head. Tiny darts of flame bored from his temples into his brain and through his neck to his upper body.

The bridge, and the whole ship with it, was still shaking so hard that all the Topsidans were struggling to keep their footing. Genkt-Tarm lurched halfway out of Rhodan's view, but used his tail like a third leg to keep his balance. He still gripped the weapon, but it was no longer aimed at Rhodan...who immediately noticed the possibility that had unexpectedly arisen.

Whatever was happening right now, *this was it.* His chance. He had to use the situation to gamble big. One last bluff had presented itself, and it would lead him to even more uncertain terrain.

In a flowing motion, he rolled onto his side, went into a crouch, and stood.

"You wanted a demonstration of my power," he said with a firm voice. *Just don't sound unsure.* That was what Thora had advised. Or ordered. "The lore of the Ferrons speaks of me coming to bring the light back to the downtrodden people! Listen well, Genkt-Tarm, for this is—"

"Silence!" the commander barked at him.

If Rhodan wasn't mistaken, he sounded unsure and alarmed—just what he was trying to avoid. The Topsidan wouldn't shoot. Hopefully not. Rhodan couldn't let up now, couldn't show any weakness. "You see that my powers are considerable. I give you one last chance to back down, Genkt-Tarm."

His opponent stared at him for a moment; the reddish eyes among the dark scale skin closed several times with a rapid snapping of the nictitating membranes. Briefly, his tongue could be seen in front of the protruding muzzle. Then he made a loud, rhythmic, braying sound.

What did that mean?

The entire crew on the bridge joined in with the sound, at last even Trker-Hon. Genkt-Tarm brayed so loudly that his whole body shook and he bent double. He seemed hardly to be able to keep himself on his feet, and, at that moment, Rhodan grasped what was happening.

They were laughing at him.

He had lost. His last, desperate bluff had failed spectacularly.

Genkt-Tarm took a step to the side, revealing a hologram that the Topsidan's body had concealed almost completely. "Well, Rhodan, mighty being from Ferron mythology," he mocked, "let's take a look at what you have to offer."

The hologram appeared to show a schematic representation of the ship's outer sensors. He had seen similar on board the *Good Hope* and learned to interpret it. An initially unclear swarm of countless differently colored symbols spread out into a three-dimensional image of light.

Between the planets of the Vega system and their giant sun flew spacecraft, hundreds in total—tough to keep track of at first. At a realistic scale, they wouldn't have been visible at all, but in the hologram each individual one had its own small symbol. Rhodan clearly recognized not only two basic types of ship, but three, represented by three groups of symbols in different hues.

In other words, it wasn't only the Ferrons and Topsidans who resided in the Vega system anymore, but also a third, unknown power.

More Arkonide ships? Were Thora's people entering the fray? No, that couldn't be. That wouldn't have led to such a storm of derision and mockery from Genkt-Tarm. There had to be another answer. One that worked in the Topsidans' favor...

Trker-Hon was suddenly standing next to him. "Hundreds of huge ships have materialized in this solar system," he explained in a calm voice, speaking so softly that no one else could hear. The words did not harbor the condescension that Genkt-Tarm had applied. "You, Rhodan, thought you could suggest in all seriousness that the structural shock that hit the *Rugr-Krehn* was a sign of your powers?" And, quieter still: "You disappoint me."

A mistake. But what should he have done? In the height of desperation, he had to grasp at this straw that had all too quickly been bent and ripped away. "Who are you, Trker-Hon?" he whispered back, not wasting time on superfluous justifications. "You recognized me! We've met once before, and you know that." He didn't explain any further. It wasn't necessary.

The Wise One only looked at him, wordless. For a moment, Rhodan nursed the idea that Trker-Hon might help him, but that moment passed.

Genkt-Tarm pointed at the hologram again. "That is your power, yes? How nice to know that you are meaningless, Rhodan. Then I can turn my attention back to the actual problem. The Ferrons remain unreasonable and are still offering resistance? They will pay the price for that."

7.

Death Is No Answer

Vega System, Planet Pigell

Kakuta materialized somewhere in the jungle with Chrekt-Orn, right in the middle of lush, sprawling nothingness. He had jumped with no goal in mind, which was more than a little risky. After his discussion with Morozova, anger had overwhelmed him so much that he hadn't taken time to think. Before the jump, only one thing had mattered to him: getting as far away as possible, to an area of the jungle that was uninhabited far and wide.

The bound Topsidan, still in a sitting position, fell backward. There was no tree trunk to support him anymore. He collapsed into a mountain of leaves, some of which drifted aside before slowly spinning to the ground again. Branches broke under his weight with a crack. Small plumes of water splashed onto the surrounding vegetation.

Water? the teleporter wondered.

Something wriggled halfway out from under Chrekt-Orn's heavy frame, thrashing around and hissing pathetically. A furry, many-legged rodent the size of a forearm, helplessly paddling in the air.

It hadn't been water, but this animal's pale, near-colorless blood.

Despite his bonds and his arms being strapped tightly to his body, the Topsidan pushed himself back into a sitting position. A thousand beetles teemed in the destroyed leaf stack; a dozen dropped from Chrekt-Orn's back while others tried to find shelter under his clothes. The half-squashed rodent had evidently found an abundant source of food in the last seconds of its life; some of the insects were crawling out of its dead, half-open mouth. The pale tongue hung down to the ground.

"Now what?" Chrekt-Orn asked, unperturbed. Teleporting, which

must have seemed almost a miracle to the Topisdan, seemed not to have bothered him too much. Nor did the fact that he was alone with the hate-filled human.

Kakuta looked at the dead creature's crushed lower body and the wriggling blackness of the beetles, which were dispersing more and more. Instead of saying anything, he lifted the knife. His fingers clenched around the handle.

"Do what you believe you have to," said the Topsidan. "I'm not afraid of death. But you could have killed me just as easily in your hideout. Or did you want to spare your companion the sight of it? Darya Morozova is—"

"Be quiet!"

"Oh? You no longer feel a need to append 'dirty lizard'? How have I earned this honor?"

The patronizing tone of these words was like a slap in the face to Kakuta, and it wrung grudging respect from him. Chrekt-Orn wasn't letting himself get carried away by his emotions, as had just happened to Kakuta. He approached the bound man with the knife.

"Do it! Ram the blade into my chest. Topsidian assassins prefer to cut out their victims' tongues. They mean it as a way to dishonor them, but for me, it's only a sign of their own disgrace. Pathetic. Like you! And just as your companion Darya had me thinking your people had reached a certain cosmic level enabling you to—"

"You don't need to fear death," said Kakuta, interrupting the torrent of words. "If I wanted to stab you, I could have done it without teleporting. I don't want to waste my energy for no reason." He cut through Chrekt-Orn's bonds with two targeted slices.

The Topsidan stayed sitting but was visibly stunned. Slowly, he raised a hand and plucked one of the beetles from his neck. "Where have you taken me?"

"To the middle of nowhere," Kakuta replied. He took a better

look around himself. Trees and thick ferns sprawled everywhere. From many branches overhead hung fungus-like growths with large, red, glowing caps. Between bushes spanned wetly gleaming nets of silky threads meters wide. Nearby, one of these artfully spun shapes quivered as a spider with a plump, fist-sized central body on finger-length legs scurried over it. A cocoon several centimeters long dangled at the edge under a leaf.

Cawing and chirping came from all directions, and the high-pitched screeching of an indeterminate animal echoed in the distance. A predator or its prey?

Kakuta had already gotten used to the oppressive humidity, although it seemed to be even worse here than elsewhere on Pigell. His clothes were clinging to his whole body, which was nothing new by now.

“I’ve been thinking about what you told me and Darya.” The teleporter made an all-encompassing hand gesture, well aware that he left himself open for those few seconds. Chrekt-Orn could easily attack him. But he was ready to spontaneously teleport if need be.

“My words have gotten through to you, then? Good, Kakuta. That’s good.”

Kakuta suppressed the urge to hit him in the face for this condescending arrogance. His opponent was probably trying to goad him. He thought of Bechia. She wouldn’t have wanted hate to get the better of him.

“You say we should surrender because we're all alone on an alien world with no one to help us. You know, Chrekt-Orn, if I were to lay a hand on you, I’d be losing myself. You’re not worth it! I won’t let myself become a murderer because of you. Besides, death wouldn’t be a suitable punishment for your crimes.”

Fluttering, a tiny bird descended from one of the dense treetops and landed on an arched turquoise leaf in which water had collected in a tiny pool. The creature dove under and came back out with a wriggling white maggot in its beak.

“Anyway,” said Tako, “you’re right. Alone on an alien world. Look around you.” He gestured at the bird, then the crushed rodent corpse behind the Topsidan. “Eating or being eaten. As of now, *you* have been left completely on your own, Chrekt-Orn. No one will help you in the middle of the jungle on a Ferron world that you subjugated.”

“But—”

“I don’t know if I should wish for you to come across a village in the endless vastness of the jungle, so that your loneliness and fight for survival would end. Because there, in that village, would live Ferrons, even if they’re the last survivors fleeing from your soldiers on this world. Maybe we’ll see each other again one day, Chrekt-Orn, and can trade notes about our experiences? I’d enjoy that.”

“But—” the man began again.

Tako Kakuta bowed and teleported back to their base. There, he closed his eyes and could still picture the Topsidan’s immeasurably dismayed grimace…could still hear the stunned “But…”

When Kakuta materialized before her, Morozova stayed calm and collected, just as she had resolved to. Nothing else would have made sense. They couldn’t argue among themselves. Not over a Topsidan. They were depending on each other.

“What did you do to him?” she asked as matter-of-factly as possible.

“Nothing. He’s alive, and we’re rid of him.” The teleporter smiled shyly, lowering his gaze for a moment before looking her in the eye again. “Please forgive me. But we cannot burden ourselves with him, Darya. His fate is no longer what matters to us.”

Her fingers fumbled with the edge of her pants pocket. “Well? What *does* matter to us?”

“Perry Rhodan. We got his message. He needs our help.”

And how are we supposed to manage that? You think we’re the ones

to help, stuck here alone in the middle of the jungle? Great idea, Tako. Let's just get in our spacecraft and fly to him. You're keeping one in your pocket, right?

She kept those thoughts to herself. Mockery wouldn't help, nor would bitterness. "Do you have a plan?" she asked instead.

"The same one we should have gone for a while ago. Darya, tell me what kind of sense it makes for us to hide here and hope we're not caught. Sooner or later, some Topsidian patrol will find us, and then that's the end of us. We can't contend with superior numbers, and my gift is too weak for us to keep running from them forever. For this solar system, for Perry Rhodan, *for the Earth*, it doesn't make the slightest difference if we live or die! Is that enough for you? Not for me! I want to get back home someday!"

He had pierced her right to her core. She couldn't argue against a single one of his words. "But how, Tako? We're stuck in the jungle!"

"We are. The Topsidans aren't."

"What are you..."

"We'll sneak on board one of their ships and leave this planet as stowaways."

Even the thought of this made her nauseous, and it didn't come close to resolving her doubts. "And then?"

Her companion shrugged, a gesture that demonstrated all too well how half-baked his "plan" was. At the same time, it really was better than waiting like sitting ducks; she couldn't deny that. *Anything* was better than that.

"We'll have to improvise," the teleporter admitted sheepishly. "By the way, we can't try to get on board the first ship we come across. We have to choose carefully. Perry's in the invaders' main battleship—Genkt Tarm's flagship! Some ship or other must be flying to that central nexus. And if not..." He stopped short.

"If not?"

“Once we’re on one of their auxiliary craft, we take it over if necessary and fly it to the *Rugr-Krehn* ourselves.”

“You want to...”

“Hijack it.” He looked resolute and self-assured, totally unlike he had minutes ago. No trace was left of his rage or the overwhelming feelings he had only barely kept contained. Quite the opposite; there was a warmth there. Bechia would have been pleased with him. “Darya, please understand—we have to take matters into our own hands! We can’t let ourselves be driven by circumstances.”

“We’re not driven,” she said, “but called.”

“Called?” he repeated in a thoughtful voice. “To me, that sounds too much like some higher power put us here.”

“Call it fate, then. Or purpose. But I’ll agree we have to *do* something.”

He nodded. “Let’s forget what’s past. Either we pull together or we go under.” He hesitantly put out his hand.

She took it. “We look forward, Tako. But one more thing. What *did* you do with Chrekt-Orn?”

The teleporter wavered a moment. “He’s alone and will have to survive. Just like us.” He held her hand a moment longer, squeezing it so hard that it almost hurt, then released it. “Where’s Conrad?”

“Still out hunting. Let’s hope he gets back soon.” Darya pulled the tablet out of her pocket. “I’ll try to pick up Topsidian com signals so we can find a suitable inroad. And you...” She smiled. “You should rest up, Tako. Get some sleep or whatever helps you get your strength back. I’m sure you’ll have to jump with us a few times before we get where we’re going.”

“Sleep?” he asked, dumbfounded. “Now?”

“It’s the best thing you can do. You’ll need all your energy.”

“And how am I supposed to calm down enough for that?”

Darya could only shrug. “If I knew that, I’d have done a few things differently over the last few days.”

“Such as?”

She gave him a wink. “I’d have slept at least twice as long, for example.”

He stared at her with such bewilderment that she couldn’t help laughing. He joined in, and when Conrad Deringhouse arrived back, they were still laughing.

The young astronaut shook his head when he saw them. “Glad you’re in such a good mood, but can one of you tell me what’s going on here?”

Kakuta gave a brief explanation. “We’re hoping you agree with our assessment.”

“And if I don’t?”

The Russian answered in his stead. “Then we’ll discuss it all again from scratch. But I hope that won’t be necessary.”

Deringhouse waved a dismissive hand. “It won’t. I’ve been thinking it over too while I was gone, and you’re right. I had to evade Topsidans multiple times. Those damn lizards are everywhere around here! We’re not safe anymore either way. So let’s take our fate into our own hands. I’m with you! But before we head out...” He ginned and pointed over his shoulder at the edge of the clearing. “I brought down an animal that looks pretty mouthwatering. We should enjoy one last meal.”

Kakuta grinned back. “Who’d have thought an American astronaut would turn out to be a pretty decent hunter too?”

“‘Hunter’ is going a little far. I just managed to fire off an alien energy weapon a few times and land a lucky hit on a...whatever it is.”

“Let’s take a look at your ‘whatever it is.’” Kakuta turned and went in the direction the astronaut had indicated before.

Morozova stayed back and switched on the tablet. Intercepting Topsidian com traffic was no mean feat. This wasn't the first time she'd tried it. Countless signals were out there, many encrypted or completely inaccessible since the tablet only detected their existence. The communication itself was on a shielded frequency. She'd have needed far more sophisticated technology to gain access to it.

However, isolated transmissions were clearly audible. Most of those centered on the mundanities of the soldiers' everyday lives, to the extent that a situation as exceptional as an invasion could be called "everyday."

Darya heard about the Topsidans' hunger or lack of sleep. Even about their fear, although no one dared to speak openly about it. By now, she knew the Topsidian mentality well enough to read between the lines.

Human problems, she thought. *Just like we and the Ferrons have. Human...* It somehow made sense to use this word not only for the "humans" she'd known so far, i.e. the Terrans, but for all the different peoples in the galaxy. This thought shook her all over again. Maybe it would have been easier if the Topsidans really *were* what Kakuta had seen in them before in his rage. Dirty lizards; cold-blooded monsters. But that was only one side of the coin, as she understood more and more.

She spent a few hours with the tablet before a tantalizing smell made her look up. Only now did she realize how long she'd been sitting there hunched over. Moving made her neck hurt.

Deringhouse, a tall, lanky figure, was roasting large chunks of meat over a small fire. He had been an astronaut, trained for space flight, just like she herself was, albeit for a different country. This difference didn't exist for her anymore. American or Russian—what did that mean now? And she was sure that, just like her, Deringhouse could never have imagined crash landing in a spacecraft and ultimately being stranded on a jungle world in another star system.

"Ultimately"? No, not at all! She'd make sure this wasn't the end

of the line for them.

She noticed with satisfaction that Kakuta had taken her advice and was sleeping not far from Deringhouse. Without his teleportation ability, their plan to travel as stowaways on a Topsidian ship, and potentially take one over, would have been doomed to failure before they even began.

They were an unusual troupe, thrown together by fate. Was destiny truly at play? She thought back to their conversation. *Called,* ran the thought through her mind again, *not driven.*

Shortly afterwards, they ate, and soon after that left their makeshift hideout in the jungle forever. A reunion with Perry Rhodan awaited them.

Or death.

8.

A Shadow over Terrania

August 6, 2036

Earth, on board the Tosoma

The Gobi wasn't on fire anymore, but from the air, the *Tosoma*'s crew could clearly see the black smudge left behind by the nuclear explosion and ongoing blaze.

The wasteland stretched to almost fifteen kilometers from Terrania's outskirts, Pounder determined. The city had been spared. So far.

On the hologram based on their outer cameras, Pounder watched as the Fantan ship rose off the ground at that very moment.

"It's too late," the *Tosoma*'s commander whispered, not for his crew but for Crest, who was still standing next to him. "They're striking out already."

"It's not too late," the Arkonide disagreed. "We're here. *You're* here, Pounder. Think about it. The Fantan ship is huge, but it's a glorified freighter with limited weaponry, while the *Tosoma* is a battleship."

"One that's a virtual wreck."

"But we're still stronger than they are!"

Rocks splashed to the side, and clouds of dust erupted. The enormous spindle craft lifted farther off the ground. A defensive shield shimmered around it; a thousand tiny sparks danced across it as stones and earth vaporized against it.

Pounder ordered the Positronic to set up a com link to the Fantan, or in the worst case, transmit over a broadband frequency, which the aliens would definitely be able to receive.

“Fantan ship, this is Lesly K. Pounder, commander of the battleship *Tosoma*,” he announced. “Land again or leave our planet at once! I’m prepared to set a suitable deadline for the return of your spread-out auxiliary craft, during which I will refrain from attacking.”

This speech was followed by dead silence on the bridge. The spindle ship ascended vertically, meter by meter, as if in slow motion. The sun made the metallic outer hull gleam yellowish beige, shining reflections refracting off it.

Pounder’s throat tightened as he imagined the cataclysmic damage this giant would cause if it plummeted and crashed. Even here, in the middle of the Gobi, an impact like that would have horrific consequences—and not only for the city that was far too close. He didn’t even want to *think* about what would happen if a burning Fantan ship crashed into Terrania itself.

“This is my last warning!” he called over the com link. “I am awaiting your response!”

The spindle craft suddenly stopped in the air, hovering, its lower end at least a hundred meters from the ground. A moment later, it tilted over, leaning towards the Earth’s surface. On the bridge of the *Tosoma*, it seemed to occur without the slightest sound.

One end of the Fantan ship flared up, there was a brief thrust, and the space giant pushed itself into a position over Terrania, where it stopped. Its hefty shadow darkened the city. The defensive shield shimmered only a few meters above the tip of the tallest building, the Stardust Tower, which robots were tirelessly building up higher into the air, story by story.

The *Tosoma* floated without propulsion as well, borne by an anti-grav field. They were only ten kilometers away but nearly two thousand meters higher—a negligible difference given the two ships’ colossal scale.

A soft crackling was followed by a Fantan’s voice. He sounded unconcerned, and justifiably so, as Pounder sadly had to admit.

“Human ship,” the alien said. “Or should I say, human of this planet who sits in an Arkonide ship and believes he can issue us orders. We have heard your ultimatum. Here is our answer. Shoot at us if you wish. Our defensive shield will likely break down sooner or later. Then, at the latest, all humans in Terrania will die. Even before that, we will not waste our firepower aiming at your ship called the *Tosoma* but will instead direct all our weapons *downward*.”

Pounder felt countless beads of sweat forming on his forehead like tiny pinpricks. “You have no right to be on this planet,” he said. “I hereby call on you for the last time to leave our solar system in peace.”

The reply was a sobering one, and there was hardly a thing Pounder could say against it. “The hunt for Besun is not yet over. We will leave this world when *we* want to.”

Pounder cut the connection. “We’ll still defeat them!” He turned to Crest. “Somehow.”

Allan D. Mercant, the former Homeland Security agent, crossed the bridge and came over to him. Pounder hadn’t seen him in a little while; since Mercant had come on board before the *Tosoma*’s launch, he’d hardly exchanged a word with him even though Mercant was ultimately to thank for the discovery of the sunken Arkonide ship.

Aside from Crest, Pounder and Mercant were certainly the oldest on board, though he couldn’t have said off the top of his head which of the two was oldest. Considering that, the former intelligence official looked shockingly youthful, almost taut. His sparse hair gave away his true age more than anything else.

“Captain?” Mercant asked.

“Glad you’re here, Allan. I need your experience. Any recommendations?”

“Are we all agreed that retreat isn’t an option?”

“Of course.” Pounder sought Crest’s gaze, and the Arkonide silently agreed.

“We need a little time. Try to negotiate a temporary ceasefire. It would be in the Fantan’s interest as well. They know that we’re capable of destroying them, even if the price would be unacceptably high.”

“I thought the same. Whatever we do, it’ll take time to prepare. The Fantan might even be grateful since they can recall their flounders in that time.”

The *Tosoma*’s commander wasted no time reestablishing the com link. Only seconds later, the familiar alien picked up again. Pounder was almost glad there was no visual signal. He still hadn’t gotten used to the sight of the grotesque, cylindrical beings. It was easier to negotiate with a voice alone.

“We offer you a temporary ceasefire,” Pounder said. “In that time, both sides can consider our respective positions.”

“You speak for your entire people?” the Fantan asked.

Trust him to hit my weak point. Pounder opted for wholehearted honesty in this regard. His opponent probably knew the answer anyway. “I’m not in a position to do that, I’m afraid. Since your auxiliary craft are collecting Besun across our planet, there are countless potential triggers for armed altercations. The ceasefire only applies to our two motherships. In addition, I’ll do my best to prevent any other conflicts. At the same time, I appeal to you to recall your auxiliary craft.”

To Pounder’s surprise, his negotiating partner did not hesitate for a second. “We are in agreement. For the next four hours of your timekeeping.”

Four hours? Why that amount of time in particular? “Agreed.”

“Time will tell, human, if we can trust your word. If not, it spells the end for your city called Terrania and for all those who reside there.”

Crest saw the relief in Pounder's face. The commander now had four hours without the threat of absolute catastrophe. A respite, on the one hand, and on the other, a laughably small time frame.

"Four hours," Mercant said quietly.

"Most likely the amount of time the flounders need to get back," the Arkonide suggested. "It's no doubt clear to the Fantan that their scattered troops are now in greater danger than before, especially if they want to approach the mothership. The *Tosoma* can shoot them down without a second thought."

"We have no time to lose," Pounder said.

Crest looked him in the eye. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'll make contact with Bai Jun in Terrania. I have to know if he can reactivate the protective dome." He was speaking of the shield generator that had kept the *Stardust* safe from its Chinese besiegers after returning from the Moon.

Mercant raised both hands and placed them together in front of his chin. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that? Crest, will the shield hold against the Fantan's weapon fire if it comes to that? Or our fire, if we shoot at the spindle craft?"

"Possibly," the Arkonide replied. "But we have to be clear about one thing. If the Fantan ship crash lands, Terrania essentially has no chance at all, with or without a shield."

The words sounded almost like a bleak prophecy in the name of the old star gods, Crest thought. That hadn't been his intent, but no sooner had he spoken them than a despondent silence formed among the three men.

Regardless, Pounder was already busying himself with other matters. As planned, he was trying to set up a secure connection with Bai Jun using the holographic control panels.

His face looked tense. Or was it pure concentration? Crest wasn't

sure. He'd known Pounder for a while now, but the details of his facial expressions remained a puzzle, as most humans' did. The time he'd spent with these people so far was nowhere near enough to recognize and understand such nuances naturally and automatically.

"I've received a short text communication from Terrania," the commander said. "They're trying to find Bai Jun. The Fantan ship has caused some excitement, as did our appearance. The *Tosoma*'s not exactly an everyday sight. Bai Jun is busy in the city. He'll be in touch as soon as possible."

Crest watched on the hologram as a Fantan auxiliary craft sped over the Gobi and braked a short distance from the spindle ship. "Mr. Pounder, measure the strength of their defensive shield when a structural gap is opened for the flounder."

Pounder's fingers ran across the holo control panel as if moving on their own; he barely looked down, able to operate them blindly.

Very good, the Arkonide thought. *He doesn't control the* Tosoma *like a novice, but like a veteran commander who's practically part of his ship.* If he'd needed any proof that Pounder truly was the right man for the job, this was it.

The result came only seconds later, when the small craft had barely disappeared into the Fantan mothership's hangar. "You're right, Crest! The shield was weaker as a whole while the structural gap was enabled."

"A guess on my part."

Mercant laughed softly. "No wonder, considering your post as a scientist on the *Aetron*!"

"You're wrong," the Arkonide insisted. "True, I am a scientist...but not a technician, an engineer, or anything along those lines. My field of expertise is, to use your parlance, the humanities. At the closest, you might understand me to be a mixture of an anthropologist and historian."

“You’ve made yourself familiar with our science,” the agent discerned.

“When I was Clifford Monterny’s prisoner, I had a lot of time to read. I had a library at my disposal that was somewhat antiquated, yet relatively well stocked.”

Soon after, a com transmission arrived. To Pounder’s relief, it was Bai Jun, just as he’d hoped. The man had once been a general in the Chinese army and leader of the siege against Terrania, but now he was a valuable ally to the future movement and to Perry Rhodan, who was lost in the Vega system.

Pounder got straight to the point, providing a brisk explanation. “The Arkonide shield generator from the *Aetron* is still in the city, right? Is it ready to deploy?”

“Anytime,” Bai Jun assured him. “But given how the city’s grown, it won’t cover the entirety of it anymore.”

“We’ll have to make do with what we have.”

Over the next few minutes, they agreed that Bai Jun would keep the generator ready to be activated immediately when the ceasefire ended in a little over three hours. Before then, they wanted to avoid giving any signals that the Fantan might misinterpret. There was still some hope that the worst possibility could be avoided, even if Pounder hardly believed that.

Between now and then, Bai Jun would make sure that everyone in Terrania moved into the areas that could be protected by the energy dome—where it currently looked the most dangerous, because the enormous ship’s shadows were darkest. In the center of the city, around the Stardust Tower.

In return, Pounder promised to do what he could to have the Fantan ship move from its current position. Only, the Besun hunters wouldn’t exactly agree to that. Why would they squander their main advantage?

Terrania, the city of hope, the gateway to the stars, was getting a raw deal again, not for the first time in its young history. The Chinese army's siege, the relentless barrage of the energy dome, the nuclear explosion soon after, the ongoing threat from the looming Fantan mothership...and now the danger of complete destruction.

You'd have to be a real optimist not to see a bad omen in this cluster of events. On the other hand, nothing good, hopeful, *truly* important never emerged without resistance from outside.

Meanwhile, small auxiliary craft were returning almost every minute as the four-hour deadline drew closer. One of the specialists reported to the commander that they had begun their analyses straight away.

"When the Fantan defensive shield is weakened by a structural gap, we can execute a surgical strike. That would let us break the shield around the spindle ship without deploying the *Tosoma*'s full arsenal. The energy dome over Terrania would keep out the stray radiation."

"Which doesn't help at all," Pounder replied in his familiar tone, both biting and barking, "if the destroyed ship crashes directly into the city!"

"That's true, Captain. We're working on it."

Only, Pounder couldn't imagine any solution to the problem. Everything they could do felt painfully inadequate. Apart from that, the question about who had led the initial nuclear attack against the Fantan was lingering in the back of his mind. According to the media reports, which his people were continually evaluating, no one had found the answer yet. That, however, was a problem that others would have to deal with.

The preparations for a final altercation with the Fantan weighed heavily on him. He'd always dreamed of the stars, of marvelous journeys, of solving the mysteries of the cosmos and seeing wonder after wonder. Not of cold, deadly war and battles of annihilation planned with military subterfuge.

He wasn't just a dreamer, but a realist too. It was entirely clear to him that he had no other choice in this situation. He had the *Tosoma* at his command, with the incredible possibilities that afforded him, and he had to use it to save the Earth and drive off the Fantan. It was necessary.

Pounder had the Positronic calculate the exact firepower needed for the surgical strike the specialist had mentioned. In the worst case, he knew, he would have to go for that last resort.

"Crest!" he suddenly exclaimed when something occurred to him that awakened new hope. "On the Moon...the *Aetron* activated a tractor beam and—"

"I know where you're going with this," the Arkonide interrupted. "But I'm afraid I must disappoint you. Yes, the *Tosoma* is capable of deploying such a tractor beam, but it's much too weak to move the Fantan ship even a meter from its current position. We couldn't use it to drag it away from Terrania. If we destroy the ship, it will crash into the city. We have no way of preventing that."

Nothing had changed. The catastrophe smoldered on the horizon, and only one last spark was needed to set off the murderous fire. A spark that could be ignited by Fantan in exactly fifty-four minutes when the ultimatum ran out.

Terrania, he thought, *you were meant to have become a blossoming city. Are you going to be a mass grave instead?*

Had he made a critical error? Wouldn't it have been better to use this time to evacuate the residents of Terrania? But would the Fantan even have allowed that? They'd have known it would significantly weaken their position.

Just then, the ship's systems received a transmission in the Fantan language. But it didn't come from the spindle ship or from one of the last craft that were still out there on Earth. Its source wasn't even in the solar system, and it was encrypted.

This made Pounder realize that they were far from reaching an end to the horror. In fact, it would only get worse.

Second Interlude

Armageddon In Full Swing

He stood before the mirror and looked into bloodshot eyes. His brows looked paler than before. He ran a hand over his head, and little white fragments came loose between his index finger and thumb before fluttering into the blue porcelain of the washbasin.

Flakes of ash. Carbonized hair.

Ivan Goratschin's fingers trembled as he turned on the faucet. The flow washed the white away; it disappeared down the drain with a gurgle. He collected some water in his cupped hands, then bent over and immersed his face in it. It felt good on his painful skin. Comfortably cool.

"Ivan!" he heard. Ishy was calling his name.

He tried to reply, but he couldn't. Ishy...

"Stop, Ivan!" she had said on the hill in the burning Gobi, within sight of the blazing Fantan craft. Only, the flames didn't damage the spindle ship, just as the earlier nuclear explosion hadn't. "Ivan, it's...it's over. It won't work!"

But he couldn't give up. He didn't want to. "Leave me alone, Ishy! It has to work. I...can do this!"

"No!" She grabbed him by the arm, trying to pull him towards her, to force him to look at her instead of the inferno in the desert that the aliens in their ship were withstanding without any damage. "No, Ivan, you have to stop!"

Who did she think she was, believing she could give him orders? He tried to shake off her grasp, but she gripped his arm even more tightly. With his other hand, he pulled hers off him. It was an effort not to push her away.

"No, Ivan, you—"

She didn't get any further. He didn't let her keep talking. But what happened next, he had never wanted.

Ivan rested both hands on the edge of the sink. Drops splashed onto the tiles with a thudding sound, one onto his naked right foot. When he looked into the mirror again, water was running down his cheeks, his entire face. Some collected on his lips; instinctively, he licked it with his tongue. It tasted salty.

He reached for a towel and dried himself off. His upper body was bare. His undershirt was hanging on the radiator; he slipped it on as he left the bathroom. They were at a hotel in Hohhot, the closest city to Terrania. In the chaos caused by the nuclear explosion, they had managed to escape. Stepan Raskujan and Artyom Tomisenkov had flown there with their stolen Fantan flounder, which they had used to bring them to the Gobi. Now the two were leaving them in peace, to Ivan's astonishment. He'd never have thought them capable of so much tact.

Ishy was sitting in front of the TV, a glass of water in her hand. She looked good.

Almost.

But she didn't blame or accuse him. She hadn't done that even once. *Since she screamed.* Instead, she had kissed him.

The OLED display still showed the same scene: the enormous Arkonide spacesphere racing across the sky like a meteorite, but on a fixed course rather than plummeting.

That only filled half the screen, though. On the other half, Ivan could see a beach. Where, he didn't know. He'd missed the introduction. Uprooted trees lay among the rubble of houses. Gurgling water flowed across the streets or across what remained now that the great flood waves had destroyed the settlement.

Three dead, a scrolling caption informed him. Almost everyone had been able to flee in time. The material damage couldn't be calculated yet, but it was astronomically high. A crushed car lay upside down, half on a terrace, half behind a shattered glass wall in

a living room. The hood had bisected the remains of a sofa.

"They showed a blurry recording," Ishy said, "of the ship rising out of the sea. It set off a tsunami. They can't judge its exact strength yet, but—"

"Does that matter, Ishy?"

"No," she admitted. "The spacesphere could manage what we didn't. It's even bigger than the Arkonide ship that was stranded on the Moon. Apparently, it has a diameter of eight hundred meters!"

"*I*," he corrected her. "What *I* didn't manage. You didn't fail; I did. Twice over, in fact."

She stood up. "That's not true." Three steps brought her closer to him. He let her wrap her arms around him, but he didn't return the gesture. He couldn't.

Ivan had focused on Ishy.

Why was she interfering? It was his task, and he would batter the Fantan ship until he destroyed it! It was his gift! He had the power to make carbon and calcium atoms react with each other to cause nuclear explosions.

Ishy screamed, jumped to the side, away from him.

The hill burned.

Not only the spindle ship, not only the Gobi down below, but their hill.

And Ishy.

Ivan threw himself onto her, pulled her to the ground, rolled around with her until the flames died out. Finally, they tipped over an edge and started sliding down a slope. They tumbled over each other, and—for who knew what reason—Ivan wondered if this was the same stretch General Bai Jun had raced down in his Jeep to speak with Perry Rhodan at the edge of the energy shield.

It meant he didn't have to think about the flames on Ishy's body.

When they finally came to a rest, she looked at him, and her face was twisted with pain. "I didn't want to," he said. The words rang hollow. "I didn't want to ignite the hill as well!"

It had to have been only a tiny, controlled explosion; otherwise, both of them would have been blasted into atoms so quickly that they'd have had no time to perceive it. And Ivan hadn't even noticed. The Death in his mind had wrenched power from him and decided on its own where and how to strike.

He let go of Ishy. Her burns had to be...

"Ivan," she said, "it's fine. Only my clothes burned. I was lucky. No —you were fast enough."

"But your face... You... The pain..." He could still only splutter.

"That slide wasn't exactly soft." She tried to laugh, but it turned into a tortured cough.

Later, they found that she'd suffered some bruises, and her left temple consisted of a single scrape that led straight into a grotesquely swollen bump on her forehead. Now they stood in front of the TV, and when Ishy changed the channel with a speech command while continuing to hug him, they saw how badly they had messed up. In its old position, the spindle ship could have been knocked down, probably even exploded, without destroying Terrania. Now, however, it was floating directly above the city buildings.

He, Ivan, was to blame for that. His failed attack had forced the Fantan to react. The spacesphere's appearance was just the straw that had broken the camel's back.

But now, Ivan knew, even his hands were tied. If Terrania was destroyed, and with it the gate to the stars for the entire world, it was his fault.

Now he lifted his arms after all and clung on to Ishy.

9.

The Plan Versus the Reality

Vega system, Planet Pigell

The fern next to her went up in flames, and the floor burst open in a fountain of soil and roots. Darya Morozova screamed and instinctively tried to jump out of the way, but something cracked against her back and carried her with it.

She flailed about, ramming her elbow into the pit of her attacker's stomach—and noticed only then that she was in a different place than she had been a second ago. Behind her, Tako Kakuta groaned.

She turned around. "S... Sorry."

The teleporter doubled over, his face pale. "Well aimed, Darya."

"Sorry," she repeated. "I... The attack..."

"It's fine."

This hadn't been the first Topsidan patrol they'd encountered since leaving their improvised jungle camp. She, Kakuta, and Deringhouse had been on the move for more than six hours, and "the lizards," as the teleporter phrased it, seemed to be everywhere.

"Where's Conrad?" the Russian asked.

"Still in our old location. At least four hundred meters from here. He hid in time."

"Get him out of there, now!"

"He's safe, Darya. I saw it for myself. I was behind cover with him. You were far enough ahead that we couldn't warn you in time. I had to get you out with a double teleport, and I didn't have the energy to take Conrad with me too."

“Double?”

“First to you, then to here.”

She nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Conrad knows where I took you. He’ll break through and get to us. We have to wait here. And in future, be careful not to let the distance between us get too large. That can turn out badly, as we just saw.”

Morozova again devoted herself to her task of listening in on enemy com traffic in the hope of intercepting a relevant message. They urgently needed a clue to a ship or auxiliary craft flying to Genkt-Tarm’s *Rugr-Krehn* that they could travel on as stowaways. So far, all her efforts had been fruitless.

It didn’t take long before they heard the rustling of someone working their way through the thick vegetation. Kakuta raised his beamer; Morozova, too, put the tablet away and pulled out a weapon. The Ferron resistance fighters had equipped them with gear they had looted. They were built for Topsidian anatomy but could still be operated by humans.

Tensed up, ready to attack or flee again at any moment, they waited…and breathed a sigh of relief when they saw Deringhouse.

“What now?” the new arrival asked.

“We keep going.” Kakuta shrugged. “What else? Until we find a Topsidian base with a suitable ship somewhere. We must be able to find one of their landing sites.”

“Why don’t we jump straight there?”

“Because I don’t know an exact location! And because I can’t teleport as far as I want. You know that.”

Deringhouse made a humming sound. Obviously he knew that. Still, Darya could understand all too well why he’d vent his displeasure. Going through the jungle was difficult and stressful, and now they’d nearly been caught for the second time, not even

counting the other Topsidian patrols they had barely hidden from in time.

On the other hand, none of them had thought it would be easy. So they marched onward. Darya set the tablet to keep running with a standard search query. The device would eavesdrop on all reachable com traffic and try to analyze it. She programmed in an alarm that would react to specific key words.

The vegetation grew so thickly that they hardly made it a single step without having to cut a path. The oppressive heat and murderous humidity seemed to get worse with every passing minute.

For a while, at least, they could follow the trail of an evidently enormous jungle creature that had literally trampled down everything in its path. Broken branches and the remains of squashed insects carpeted the makeshift track, which would no doubt be unrecognizable as one by the next day at the latest.

Abruptly, Deringhouse, who was currently at the front, came to a halt. “Hey, you have to look at this. It’s...”

She heard Kakuta retch.

“Better you don’t see it, Darya!” he cried.

It was too late for that. She looked between the two men at a bloody mass of meat and bones. Ant-like insects were moving towards the huge carcass in straight lines. It had to be a gigantic animal. It stank repulsively.

“If there’s still anything left,” she said soberly, “this victim can’t have been dead all that long. The only strange thing is that the predator left its prey behind.”

Kakuta put a hand to his mouth and breathed heavily. “Our friend probably wasn’t hungry anymore.”

“Our friend?” Deringhouse asked.

“Well, the hunter must have been the monstrosity that made the

trail we've been following all this time, and—"

He cut himself off when he realized his mistake. Morozova had noticed already. The cleared path in the jungle ended exactly at this point. The carcass obviously belonged to the creature that had trampled its way through the vegetation.

Only...who had killed it, and how? A shiver ran down her spine as she observed that the treetops above them were open to the sky and not, as per usual, a closed roof of leaves, colorful fruits, and intertwined branches.

She pointed up meaningfully. "We need to get out of here. Now! A bird of prey struck here, and I'm not interested in strolling through its hunting grounds."

A shadow fell on them, and she heard a screeching caw. Feathers rustled in the wind. She jerked her head up and saw an enormous beak half smeared with blood. That was why there was still something left of its prey. They had disturbed the bird during its meal.

Morozova fired at the same moment as Deringhouse. The huge creature shrieked. Another shot. They jumped to the side. With a crash, the monster thundered to the ground behind them—an odious smacking sound mixed with the breaking of bones.

She turned around. The animal was croaking pathetically. It had to be more than three meters large without its wings. The right wing lay hidden half under the body, while the left was bent at an unnatural angle. Talons at least twenty centimeters long scrabbled at the earth. Its head reared over and over.

Deringhouse put the bird out of its misery with a well-aimed shot. "Friendly old world, this," he remarked dryly.

"I'd guess the Ferrons normally have nothing to do with beasts like these," Kakuta commented. "Most of them live in towns. But I know what you mean."

"Let's keep going," Morozova urged. "The sooner we get away

from here, the better."

But before they could go on, her tablet's alarm went off. She pulled out the small computer. Had the automatic search routine actually found something?

Kakuta watched as the Russian accessed the com message the tablet had intercepted. At the same time, he kept a close watch on their surroundings. The last thing he wanted was for another of the same species to come along and surprise them. Or a Topsidian patrol.

In a motion that had become routine by this point, he wiped the sweat from his forehead and eyebrows before it could trickle into his eyes. The heat was bothering him more than it had over the last few hours, likely due to all the upheaval. They were also standing far too close to the stinking animal carcass. To top it all off, an ever-expanding pool of blood had formed under the bird of prey that didn't smell especially pleasant.

"We should get away from here," he said emphatically. "It'll be teeming with scavengers before long, and I don't want to know what form those take in this jungle."

Morozova looked up from her tablet with satisfaction. "Bull's-eye! Genkt-Tarm, the Topsiands' new high commander, has called Numar-Honwort to him along with leaders of some other individual task forces. They're planning a meeting on the *Rugr-Krehn*."

Deringhouse snapped the fingers of his left hand. "And this Numar-Hin... What was his name again?"

"Numar-Honwort. And yes, he's right here on Pigell! He's just summoned the crew of his ship, the *Togk-Tamal*, back to him." Morozova put the tablet away again. "This is our chance!"

"I assume we don't have much time?" Kakuta asked.

"No exact times were given, but it sounded urgent."

"If the big boss is calling," said Deringhouse, "it must be

customary even for the Topsidans to get their asses in gear."

"How far from here is the ship?"

Morozova grimaced. "That brings us to the problem. Five kilometers."

The teleporter shook his head. "Forget it. There's no way I can jump that far! Two kilometers, sure, if I really have to. Maybe even with both of you at the same time. But five? Never."

"Pull yourself together!" Deringhousesaid firmly. "I see it as an almost unbelievable stroke of luck! Only *five* kilometers! It could have been fifty, or five hundred!"

"Pulling myself together won't help. I just can't jump that far."

"Then we should stop wasting time and head out already! It takes a miserably long time to get anywhere in this jungle, but maybe we'll still be quicker than the *Togk-Tamal*'s crew. You save your energy, Tako. When we get there, you'll need to teleport us on board or we're doomed from the start. All right?"

Kakuta couldn't argue with that. Morozova stayed silent too.

They knew what was at stake, and they drove each other forward. In the process, they went to their limits or even beyond. Kakuta wondered where he'd found the energy reserves for this strenuous march through the jungle. Why he didn't just collapse. However, a grim thought wouldn't leave the back of his mind, and it had an unavoidable logic: if they really did reach the ship's landing site in time, where was he supposed to get the strength for a final teleport? On the other hand, ruminating on that point didn't help, because he couldn't rest, as sensible as that would have been.

Deringhouse took the lead so that he could handle the most grueling work. The astronaut had to forge a path for them. He used a knife and, in the worst cases, even a hand beamer to cut a swath.

They're making sure I have it as easy as possible, Kakuta thought. *That's their way of wrestling with the problem.* He ardently hoped he wouldn't have to disappoint them anyway. Even so, the journey was

anything but relaxing, and they made agonizingly slow progress.

When they briefly stopped to recover their strength, they tore into their drinking water supplies. Kakuta wished he could pour the rest of it over his head. It was tough to keep himself from doing just that.

"I'll try to pinpoint our exact position," Morozova announced. He turned to face her. She was already tapping on the tablet while chewing on her lower lip. Seconds later, her features relaxed. "We're closer than I thought. The *Togk-Tamal* is about one kilometer ahead...provided Numar-Honwort hasn't set out yet."

"Tako?" Deringhouse asked.

The teleporter immediately understood what the former astronaut was getting at. "I can't just aimlessly jump into this ship that I can't picture! I don't even know what it looks like, and 'about one kilometer ahead' is nowhere near enough detail. I need visual contact for a targeted teleport."

The American ostentatiously lifted up his knife. "Then we keep going and hope the landing site isn't too heavily guarded."

"Believe me, I wish it were different," Tako emphasized. "But that isn't much help right now either."

They struggled on until an exceptionally stubborn thicket soon forced them to stop. The knife hardly made any impact on the plant's interlocked branches, and they wanted to avoid using the beam weapon so close to the landing site. On top of that, there were scraping, gibbering sounds coming from inside the thicket. Clearly, animals were dwelling inside that couldn't be frightened off without possibly causing a scene.

"We'll go around the outside," said Kakuta.

Morozova agreed with a nod. "But have you seen how far this thing stretches?"

He hadn't. And when he now took a proper look at their surroundings, he cursed. As far as the eye could see, this plant

towered two meters high with its turquoise leaves.

“It looks like it drove off all other vegetation,” Morozova added. “Nothing else grows anywhere nearby. Very weird.”

The scratching sound came closer, paired with a kind of squelching. And wasn’t that…movement? Between the branches? No…the branches themselves were moving! They bent like the rigid limbs of an ossified ancient creature.

Kakuta turned around. The swathe they’d cut on the way there no longer existed. The thicket was burying the trampled plants beneath it, and there, the branches’ movements could be seen even more clearly. His companions hadn’t noticed it yet.

“This thing is alive,” he said softly. He instinctively acted as if a predator was coming for him. No hasty movements, no loud noises.

“Of course it’s alive,” Deringhouse replied. “All plants are—”

“It’s surrounding us,” Kakuta interrupted, impassive. “Don’t tell me *that’s* normal.”

His companions both turned around at once. All color drained from the cosmonaut’s face. “This can’t be…” She swallowed the rest of the sentence. It *could* be happening. They had just never ever imagined it.

“There are plants on Earth that move as well,” Deringhouse said. His voice trembled. “But *this* is just unbelievable. Or is it growing really fast?”

The thicket crept closer. Root strands trembled over the ground.

Kakuta extended his arms. “We shouldn’t wait around to find out if this is a carnivorous plant.”

The others understood and made direct body contact with him. “Can you jump?” Morozova asked.

But the question wasn’t if he could. He *had* to.

He teleported and saw another new environment: a few trees, a wide clearing behind them, and something that didn't match with the jungle at all...

Then he collapsed. Too much. The strain was simply too much. But he didn't hit the ground. Blurrily, he saw Morozova's face. She had caught him. His eyelids shut of their own accord, and he didn't know if he fell asleep on the spot or lost consciousness.

When he awoke again, he wondered how much time had passed. A minute? An hour? A day? The awful feeling of weakness in his body was gone, at least; he felt a new wave of energy. "The ship. What happened with the *Togk-Tamal*?"

"It already launched," Morozova replied. She was sitting right next to him and smiling. "Don't blame yourself. We'll put plan B into action."

Kakuta sat up. "And what's that?"

"We board the next best auxiliary craft, and as soon as it leaves Pigell, we take it over and set a course for the *Rugr-Krehn*."

"We steer it ourselves, do we? Have you considered that we have absolutely no clue how a Topsidian ship works?"

Deringhouse shook his head. "There won't be any strange witchcraft behind it. Darya and I are astronauts. We'll be able to figure out the controls. Somehow."

Now all you have to say is that problems are there to be overcome, thought Kakuta.

"And in the end," Conrad added, "problems are there to be overcome."

Tako closed his eyes. *Yeah, perfect. Sounds like a great plan...*

10.

Grave Robbers

Vega system, on board the Rugr-Krehn

Thora and Ras Tschubai reached their destination without further incident. The Arkonide was still carrying the Topsidan's corpse with her. As hoped, Wuriu was keeping a close watch of the area with his scanning ability, and he noticed their approach through the solid wall. He opened the access point to the narrow maintenance duct from the inside.

First, the Arkonide heaved the corpse inside. Wuriu stared at it, horrified, but grabbed the Topsidan without wasting any time on questions and pulled it out of the way.

"What happened?" he asked. The exact same horror visible on his face could be heard in his voice. He pushed the corpse even farther aside. The head banged against the side wall with a dull sound. Wuriu made a strangled sound.

Tschubai climbed through the entryway, and Thora went in last, closing the hatch behind her. She took a deep breath. They'd managed it. For now, they were safe, and despite that dreadful incident, it had been well worth it. Now their small party was perfectly equipped. All they had to do was strategically place a few explosives and, in the worst case, Thora could destroy the ship via a com signal and deal a devastating blow to the Topsidans.

She shared their freshly looted weapons with Wuriu and the two Ferrons while giving a brief explanation. When she mentioned Tschubai's weakness, he insisted that he was doing better by now and was ready for more jumps.

"Not before it's absolutely necessary," Thora said. "Tschubai, you'll rest for as long as possible."

"With all due respect, it's already not possible!" the teleporter

countered. “We have to help Perry! He’s up to his neck in trouble, without a doubt!”

Wuriu struck the same chord. “We didn’t find out what made the ship shake so hard, but it reminded me of when we were on the *Good Hope* and the Topsidans showed up. It can’t be a good—”

“The ship shook?” the Arkonide interrupted.

“Are you saying you didn’t notice?”

“In... In the anti-grav shaft,” Tschubai said. “It actually did sort of look like a tremor went through the walls.”

Thora’s eyes began to tear up from heightened emotion. A foreboding rose inside her. “Describe it more precisely!” A few seconds later, it was clear to her what must have happened. “You’re describing a structural shock caused by the simultaneous arrival of numerous spacecraft at very close range. In the anti-grav shaft, we were largely isolated from it. The tractor beam in the shaft compensated for it, and our battledresses shielded us even more. No wonder we didn’t realize.”

“What now?” Tschubai asked.

“We check on Rhodan,” she decided.

“I’ll—”

“Not you, Tschubai! Your time hasn’t come yet. You can’t just jump to him! Maybe his plan is working after all. We can’t reveal ourselves and potentially make things worse.”

“Then what *are* we going to do?”

“We’ll get an overview.” As she said this, her gaze wandered to Wuriu. “More accurately, *you’ll* do that. This maintenance duct leads to about twenty meters from the bridge. Let’s hope that’s where Rhodan is. Can you—”

“It depends,” the mutant interrupted, clearly understanding what she was getting at. “I can look through several walls at this

distance, yeah. The question is what energy conduits might be in the way or if there are special materials protecting the bridge. I won't know for sure until we get there."

They started walking—or rather, crawling. The duct didn't give them a lot of space. The dead Topsidan remained behind, a silent testimony to the horrors of war.

Here and there, repair robots stood in nooks alongside the duct. Thora considered whether they should activate one of the robots and use it for their own purposes, but the necessary reprogramming gave her pause. Her knowledge didn't stretch far enough for that.

Unerring, she pressed forward, carrying the surplus battledress that was for Rhodan to put on. She continually used her own suit's integrated scanner to keep an eye on their surroundings and check their position so that they could take the right path at each of the many branches without losing any time. They were getting closer to the bridge, and thus—hopefully—Perry Rhodan as well.

If he had been taken there.

If he was still there now.

If he was even still alive.

Rhodan knew he had lost. He'd overplayed his hand, gone too far. *Failed spectacularly,* he thought.

Trker-Hon, the Wise One, whispered a few last words to him before turning away and walking off, over to the high commander Genkt-Tarm: "It was a mistake."

What? Rhodan thought. *That I saved you in Thora's cell in the desert fort on Rofus? That I didn't let Chaktor shoot you when you were defenseless?* He wished he could have hurled these words as the Wise One, but he kept a hold of himself. Maybe he'd express them if the situation escalated fully—if Genkt-Tarm was really about to shoot him. Maybe it would win him a few seconds or provoke an unexpected response.

“Thank you for the amusement, Rhodan,” said Genkt-Tarm. “So, this is your mysterious power of which the Ferron lore speaks, is it?” He pointed at the hologram, where countless symbols represented the newly arrived ships. “Perhaps you’d like to know what’s actually going on?”

Rhodan stayed silent. The other man would keep talking anyway, savoring his triumph to the last, he was certain. And he wasn’t disappointed.

“Those are Fantan,” Genkt-Tarm explained in a disparaging tone. “Vultures. Rubble scavengers. Pathetic creatures who only care about Besun and nothing else.”

“Besun?” Rhodan asked.

“The Fantan are coming to this theater of war like flies swarming to a corpse to feast and lay their eggs. They’ll look for prey in the remnants, descending like locusts on the planets we’ve left in ruins.”

“Galactic…plunderers?” The image was bizarre to Rhodan, but it had a certain logic to it.

“A disgrace.” Genkt-Tarm’s bark of a laugh resounded again. “Perhaps even more than you, Rhodan, if that’s even possible. Grave robbers who look for the very special, the extraordinary, things they’ve never seen before. They seek out curiosities. They appear, but they disappear again when they’ve had enough. Like flies… Did I say that already? And, like flies, you can shoo them away with a single swat of the hand. They don’t fight unless you push them into a corner and leave them no other choice!” Genkt-Tarm came closer, reached out an arm, and dug his fingers into Rhodan’s shoulder. “Now do you understand just how much of a laughing stock you made yourself by suggesting the Fantan, of all things, were a sign of your power?”

It could even have worked. With a little more luck than I was granted. Pain throbbed in Rhodan’s shoulder. The Topsidan’s fingers were squeezing his flesh into the bone. He kept silent. There was nothing to say.

Trker-Hon stood a few meters away. He didn't look happy about this whole situation. Did he somehow feel obligated to the alien after all? Maybe that held Rhodan's only chance to survive.

"Genkt-Tarm," the Wise One said. "I must speak with you about __"

"Not now! I don't need any oh-so-wise advice on how to handle *this*. At the moment, I see the last, desperate hope of the Ferrons in front of me, painstakingly preserved. They witnessed the end of their Thort, and now I'll crush their mythical savior figure too!"

Rhodan groaned as the Topsidan applied even more pressure. There was a cracking in his shoulder. It felt as though darts of flame were boring from his collarbone into his neck.

"You wanted to bring light to the Ferrons?" Genkt-Tarm sneered. "But all you bring to this population of blue-skinned fools are the Fantan! And now, before I kill you, Rhodan, and throw the Ferrons' asinine hope onto the refuse pile...tell me the truth. Who and what are you really?"

"You can't seriously be expecting me to answer you?" Rhodan turned his head and stared pointedly at the man's hand, which was clamped around his shoulder like a vise.

Genkt-Tarm let go, took a step back, and aimed his weapon at his prisoner's head again. "That is exactly what I'm expecting. Perhaps I can help you to remember. After all, Rhodan, you can't be so naive as to think I'd know nothing about you."

"Still, why should I tell you anything if you'll kill me anyway?"

"Your life is completely immaterial to me." Genkt-Tarm hissed, and his long tongue swung a finger's width in front of his lizard mouth. "No, that's not true. Our highly esteemed Wise One will immediately cite the Social Directive and stress that life must be respected in and of itself, even yours, and that it must only be destroyed if there is no other way. In your case, Rhodan, there actually is an alternative. We have our conversation, you tell me everything I want to know...and afterwards, you make it as plain as

can be to the Ferrons that you are *not* the one who will bring the light back to them or whatever those fools are hoping of you. We'll show the Ferrons that I've beaten you. Finally, I'll throw you in a cell until every last corner of this solar system belongs to the Topsidans at last...and after that, Rhodan, you'll be gone from this place forever. What do you make of that?"

Nothing. He didn't say it out loud. He had to be smart and make use of every opportunity—and he would do just that. "You say you know some things about me, Genkt-Tarm. I'm excited."

Without a word, the Topsidan turned away, went to a workstation, and entered some commands. A hologram popped up, initially just a glowing circle, but it transitioned into a visual recording. It showed the last moments of *Good Hope* as it crashed into Ferrol in flames.

Rhodan remembered those seconds all too well. It had happened only a few days earlier. Days that felt like months to him. He, Thora...all of them had expected to go down with the ship. It was a miracle they were even still alive. Some of them, at least; he didn't know what had become of Anne Sloane, Kakuta, Morozova, and Deringhouse. *He* was still alive, anyway, and his fate had ultimately led him *here*, to the center of the enemy's power.

"Impressive sight," he said. "But what do they have to do with me? You and your soldiers have destroyed a lot of Ferron ships and space stations."

"Please, Rhodan, don't embarrass yourself a second time. Don't insult my intelligence! You know as well as I do that this spacesphere is not a product of Ferron technology. A single being could be rescued from the wreckage. An Arkonide. Her ship was ancient; our experts estimate ten thousand years old. And we both know that a single person can't control a ship like this one. You were also on board that ship when it crashed, weren't you? Tell me how you managed to get away unnoticed."

Rhodan knew it was over. But he wanted to at least keep his dignity. He couldn't humiliate himself and be treated like a fool any longer. "I could tell you, but you wouldn't believe me."

“I have a vivid imagination. Try me.”

Rhodan weighed up his chances. One leap towards Genkt-Tarm and he might manage to hit the weapon out of the Topsidan’s hand before it was fired. Maybe he’d even be able to grab hold of the beamer himself and take his enemy hostage. But then what? There was no way to get off this ship that he’d come to voluntarily. None.

“I’m waiting, Rhodan.”

“Well, I…” He took a deep breath. It didn’t matter. Better to die than to let the Topsidans use him as their puppet. He tensed his muscles, ready to make a dash for the commander, as hopeless an endeavor as it was.

The air shimmered before him.

A human figure materialized less than a meter away. One he recognized. Rhodan switched gears immediately. “Quickly!” he cried, taking a step forward and touching Ras Tschubai. “Get us out of here!”

Genkt-Tarm shrieked and changed his aim, about to fire.

“What—” he heard the Topsidan shriek again, before they vanished from the bridge.

11.

Don't Divide Up the Besun Before the Victory

August 6, 2036

Earth, on board the Tosoma

The Fantan spindle ship floated above Terraria, still barely above the Stardust Tower's tip. The enormous ship cast a shadow across almost the entire city.

"The transmission," Pounder called. "We have to decrypt that com transmission!"

Crest could understand the commander's urgency. In this situation, when things had escalated to breaking point and only the as-yet-ongoing ceasefire was keeping Terrania, and perhaps the world, safe from chaos and destruction, the Fantan had received a message from the depths of space.

What did it mean? Could the Besun hunters expect reinforcements? Was that why they had so readily agreed to Pounder's request for a ceasefire?

The Arkonide tried his hand at decoding the com message, as did some of the specialists on the *Tosoma*'s bridge. The language and frequency corresponded to the usual Fantan pattern, that much was clear, but the message could not be decoded easily.

Crest gave the *Tosoma*'s Positronic a vocal command to devote itself to the task. Arkonide decryption mechanisms should have been superior to anything their opponent was capable of—even at the standard of ten thousand years ago.

"Whatever was in that message," Mercant said to him, "it was important."

Confused, Crest turned his head. "I'm assuming the same, but how did you reach that conclusion?"

The former agent pointed at the hologram depicting the spindle ship. “Our special friends are...reacting.”

The three-dimensional image left no doubt as to the truth of this. The spindle ship’s energy signature was changing abruptly; according to the readings, more power units were coming online.

“Fantan ship!” Pounder transmitted. “Kindly provide an explanation for your behavior! I am not willing to—” He cut himself off mid-sentence when he saw what was happening. He stood there, his arm half-raised. “This can’t be real.”

Something was falling out of an open hatch.

“What... What is that?” Mercant sounded more bewildered than Crest had ever heard him before.

Whatever the object, it moved while it was plummeting. It disappeared out of the hologram’s range of coverage.

A moment later, thousands of items rained out of the hatch. Crest requested a more detailed hologram. The Positronic reacted immediately and showed a close-up view of the open hatch. They couldn’t see inside; it appeared impenetrably dark.

A table fell out. A cabinet. An ancient Greek pillar collided with a fiery red car.

“They’re throwing Besun out of their ship,” Pounder said, baffled.

The Fantan didn’t respond to their call. Two of their auxiliary craft approached the spindle ship, racing over the desert, and docked as the bizarre “rain” ended. The Arkonide couldn’t help thinking of the astronauts Reginald Bull and Eric Manoli, who had accompanied Rhodan on the *Stardust*’s flight. Along with two young mutants, Sid González and Sue Mirafiore, the pair of them had tried to establish peaceful contact with the Fantan. The four humans had been abducted by the Fantan, presumably as Besun. Since then, no more had been heard from them. Had they just been shown the fate the four of them had suffered? Had they been carelessly thrown

away, like a child might discard an old toy he'd grown bored of?

"Com transmission from Terrania," someone reported; Crest knew the voice but couldn't put a name to it right now. "It's Bai Jun, Captain."

"Put it on speaker!" Pounder ordered.

"What's happening up there?" came Bai Jun's voice a moment later. "The splattered remains of a cow are lying in front of the Stardust Tower, and someone was almost crushed by a flagpole!"

Just then, Crest received an update from the onboard Positronic. It had managed to clarify the encoded Fantan message, which was extremely short, consisting of only a single word followed by a set of coordinates specifying a location outside the solar system.

"Mr. Pounder, may I answer his question?" the Arkonide asked.

The *Tosoma*'s commander invited him to do so with a nod.

"The Fantan are discarding Besun," Crest explained, "primarily that which is in their air chambers, most likely, and the largest items might follow after that. They need free space on their ship for loading more cargo. That com message told them the position of their next hunt. Beyond that, it consists of only a single word: 'Besun.'"

Bai Jun accepted this in silence, while Pounder stared wide-eyed at Crest.

"Tell all the residents of Terrania to get themselves inside buildings," the Arkonide recommended. "They'll be safe there for now. We shouldn't activate Terrania's defensive shield. Not that the Fantan would see it as a hostile act." He registered incidentally that increased numbers of Fantan flounders were now flying in from all directions. The aliens were getting ready to leave Earth. "It looks like our visitors will see themselves out," he said, concluding his analysis. "What was it the Fantan told us not too long ago? They'll leave when *they* want to. Clearly, that time has come."

Pounder shook his head. "Sounds too good to be true."

“There is one thing that puts a damper on my relief, however,” Crest said. “The coordinates in the message point to the Vega system.”

An almost paralyzing stillness followed the Arkonide’s words. *The Vega system,* Pounder thought. The very place Perry Rhodan and his crew had gone missing in the *Good Hope*. That couldn’t be a coincidence. What had happened there? He couldn’t see any connection.

A thought settled firmly in him, stubbornly and with a vehemence that wouldn’t let it be pushed away. He was entirely capable of finding out what the connection was, because he was in command of the *Tosoma*, a ship that could travel faster than light.

Ronnie Bergenbaum, one of the NASA specialists of German Jewish origin, entered the bridge. His face was practically hidden under a wild, untamed mane of hair. Pounder had assigned him the task of watching Earth’s ordinary news streams to keep abreast of what the Fantan auxiliary craft across the world were doing. He had known Ronnie forever and trusted him implicitly. If he was personally coming to the bridge, there was no doubt he had vital information. Pounder waved him over.

Bergenbaum hurried closer. “As of a few minutes ago, the Fantan everywhere on Earth are dropping everything. They’re getting into their ships, not bothering anymore with the Besun they just collected, and setting course for the Gobi.”

“Just as I surmised,” Crest said. “They really are heading out.”

“To Vega,” Pounder murmured. The thought was nagging at him again. This neighboring solar system that had seemed unreachable a few weeks earlier was now only a short flight away.

The gigantic spindle ship rotated and ascended—away from Terrania. Flounders continued hurtling towards it without end. Another hatch opened, and more Besun rained down.

On the close-up hologram, Pounder recognized something that

he thought he had imagined for a moment: an enormous tree with sprawling leaves and gleaming red fruits. It disappeared from the image and from his thoughts at the same time. He had more important things to deal with.

"The ship is moving away from the city," Mercant said. "And a ton of auxiliary craft are docking. We could destroy the mothership and eliminate the Fantan threat for good."

Pounder heard the "but" as clearly as if Mercant had said it aloud. *But it would be murder…if the Fantan don't attack us first.* Not to mention the ceasefire still hadn't ended yet. And yet, a chance like this didn't come along twice.

He contacted the aliens again. "Explain yourselves! You are carrying stolen goods from our people, and—"

"It is Besun," a voice interrupted him. "It belongs to us. We are leaving your world now. The ceasefire will continue for almost one more hour by your reckoning. By then, we will be gone from your planet, never to return. All in all, the yield has been disappointing. We…" He paused. "We ask you not to impede our auxiliary craft."

An absurd thought came to Pounder's mind: *Give us back the Golden Gate Bridge.* Instead, he said, "We won't impede you." All material damage was fixable, and the consequences of this final confrontation could have been markedly more dire.

He cut the connection, sought Crest's gaze, and read agreement in it. "Take us to the Vega system. There must be a reason the Fantan are hoping to find better Besun there than on Earth."

"You mean to follow the spindle ship, Mr. Pounder?"

"There are plenty of reasons to do just that. We need to clear up Rhodan's fate." He hesitated a moment. "And the fates of Thora and the others too."

Tears welled in the corners of the Arkonide's eyes. "You're the commander."

"What would you do, Crest?"

“I’m an old man.”

“But?”

“I would take the *Tosoma* into the Vega system as soon as the Fantan have disappeared and our presence on Earth is therefore no longer strictly necessary.”

Pounder smiled. “I’m an old man too, and you think just like me.”

Before the ultimatum had even expired, the spindle ship rose into the air, sped across the sky like a shooting star, and vanished.

The *Tosoma* followed. *A faster-than-light journey,* Pounder thought, scarcely believing himself that it was really happening. The vast chasm of space melted away into a distance no longer measured in the abstract concept of infinite years.

Crest had prepared the spacesphere’s crew for the structural shock that accompanied their return to the standard universe. Nonetheless, it hit Pounder hard, and the initial piercing pain was followed by sickening nausea.

That was why it took him a few seconds to realize they had materialized in the middle of a battle.

Third Interlude

Desolate and Empty

Ishy’s touch was soft, and he thoughtlessly raised his hand to stroke her cheek. She jerked back when he touched her wound. *Where she scraped across the ground while rolling down the hill to get away from the hellish flames.*

On the TV, the tidings of horror gave way to one all-consuming story. There seemed to be no other topic anymore.

“It’s over, Ivan,” said Ishy. “They’re gone.”

The screen showed footage from the city of Terrania in the middle of the Gobi Desert. In the background, a partly dried up Juyan salt lake shimmered red and green in the light of the setting sun. Aside from that, something was missing that everyone on Earth expected to see by now. The Fantan's gigantic spindle ship had departed, as had the *Tosoma* shortly after it. The Gobi was desolate and empty.

In his mind, Ivan repeated the thought that had just occurred to him. *Desolate and empty.* Where had he heard that pithy phrase before?

He responded to Ishy's words with only silence. What was he supposed to say? The world hadn't ended after all. No war had torn it apart despite the error he'd committed. Despite his failed attack on the Fantan.

Suddenly, Ishy was close to him again. He felt her lips, and her eyes were as large as lakes in which he lost himself. The scene of the Gobi was reflected in her pupils. Even there, she had kissed him.

"That slide wasn't exactly soft," She had tried to laugh, but it had turned into a tortured cough.

"I'm sorry." It annoyed him that he couldn't come up with anything better than those empty words—that hollow cliché. That was all he had after almost killing Ishy?

"You're apologizing for saving my life?"

That reply surprised him. "You got burned because of me," he said. His gaze wandered up the slope. On the hilltop, the flames were still burning. His flames. They still roared up into the air, and until a few seconds ago they had been blazing on Ishy.

She pushed herself up. Her arms were trembling. "You're a hero, Ivan."

"I failed. The Fantan ship—"

"But you tried."

A hero. Or a failure. Maybe the two were so close that it only depended on which angle you looked from.

Now, the aliens weren't on Earth anymore. Was that a sign that he, Ivan Goratschin, was a hero? Or a failure? Or neither of the two because it had nothing to do with him and his attack?

In the Gobi, scorched Earth and radiation had been left behind, forming a wide circle around the site of the explosion Ivan had unleashed with his mutant gift. A dead zone, far too close to Terrania, but still farther away than Ivan had feared at first.

Ishy went into the bathroom. He heard her turn on the water, followed by the typical rustling of a painkiller being pushed out of its packaging. Her face looked nasty, but it could have been much worse. If the collision with the rock had been just slightly lower, she'd have lost an eye. Instead, she'd walked away with only a bump right above her left eyebrow, an immense swelling that gleamed in a variety of colors by now.

On the TV, Ivan saw for the umpteenth time the blurry footage of the two spacecraft disappearing into the sky. At the start, they filled the entire screen, but they eventually turned into a speck the size of a pinhead.

"Fantan leave Earth," read a caption at the lower edge. As if everyone didn't know that already. In that respect, it resembled a statement of "Extraterrestrial life discovered." Every sensation lost its impact if you heard it often enough.

Ishy shrieked in the bathroom. Glass shattered with a jangling sound.

Ivan reacted without thinking. After a few steps, he was standing in front of the door and tearing it open. Ishy was holding her index finger in her mouth, and when she pulled it out, blood was flowing over its tip. "I just cut myself on the glass," she said, and pointed to her feet. "Don't come in."

He was only wearing socks, and the floor was covered in shards. "Why did you..."

“I had a fright.”

“About what?”

“I…” She wavered.

“Your gift?”

Ishy nodded. She didn’t like talking about it. She held her bleeding finger under running water for a moment, then carefully left the bathroom. “I was thinking about the Fantan, and my gift showed me one of them.”

“But they all left the planet! You can’t be receiving images from their ship. It’s too far away.”

She breathed in heavily. “Wait!”

“You don’t have to show me.”

“I want to, though.”

A scene appeared before her like a ghostly hologram, and it didn’t show flames and heat like in Ivan’s visions—the ones he struggled to shake off. Quite the opposite.

Ice stretched all the way to the horizon, and oddly jagged peaks of endless white loomed. Somewhere far in the distance, a helicopter was clattering across the sky.

Amid this desert, even more hostile to life than the Gobi, similar to it and yet so completely different, lay the wreckage of a Fantan flounder. Whatever may have led to the crash and explosion of the alien auxiliary craft, the debris had melted deep into the pack ice.

The Fantan piloting this flounder had survived. His bizarre cylindrical body was slowly pushing itself farther from the wreckage. With every meter, he left behind a slimy substance that looked like a mixture of blood and pus.

At some point, he slipped in the icy wind, or fell from exhaustion. Powerless, he tried to push himself up again, but at last he lay there,

quiet and stiff. A layer of frost spread over his body.

The image vanished. Ishy's face remained expressionless. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

He mused on it. "I feel sorry for him," he said after some hesitation. His own empathy surprised him. But if he wasn't going to be honest to himself and to Ishy, then to whom?

"Me too," she replied. "Do you want to hear something crazy, Ivan?"

He nodded.

"I've fought so hard against the Fantan. Spent all my energy on it. And now that they're gone, I feel..."

"...empty," he said, ending the sentence. "I know."

"How?"

"Because I feel the same way."

For a while, they stood next to each other in silence until Ishy took his hand. He let her do it.

It brought comfort.

12.

Incalculables

Vega system, Planet Pigell

Cold crawled into every last corner of Kakuta's body. After the pervasive heat on Pigell, it was a shock. He looked around the room the three of them had teleported into a few seconds earlier. The walls, ceiling, and floor gleamed in a rich shade of blue. Piles of metal boxes stood in numerous alcoves, but otherwise the room was entirely empty. A static humming filled the air, as if electric devices were steadily working at low power.

Kakuta breathed a sigh of relief. There was no catastrophe. They hadn't materialized in the middle of a group of Topsidans. He'd had to jump blindly and was ready to immediately disappear again. But the risk had paid off.

Morozova had suspected that no crew members would be present in this side section of the fifteen-meter auxiliary craft. Even if she didn't qualify as an expert, exactly, she was inarguably the most familiar with the Topsidans out of the members of their little group, so the teleporter had followed her advice. They would never have had certainty, so there was no choice but to try their luck. It wouldn't be the last time.

"Good," said Conrad Deringhouse. "Let's hope they don't catch us before launch. As soon as we're in the air..." He stopped short.

There was no need to finish that sentence. They all knew the task ahead. They'd have to fight to disable the ship's crew, and they'd have to do it quickly before it reached its destination. Only, in contrast to their opponents, none of them had combat experience.

Kakuta felt like he'd voluntarily handed himself over to the executioner. But there was no going back now, and it had been the right decision. Anything was better than continuing to cower on Pigell as the Topsidans spread death across the entire system.

The electrical humming in the room seemed to be getting louder. *Must be my imagination,* he told himself.

While Morozova looked at her tablet and Deringhouse kept an eye on the doorway, weapon in hand, Kakuta wondered where exactly they had landed. What purpose did this room serve? It only measured about two meters by three, making it almost more of a closet.

The teleporter went over to one of the boxes. It was anchored to the wall with snap fasteners. Only when he was standing directly in front of it did he notice narrow slides in the container's sides, only a few millimeters wide. He bent down and leaned forward to see inside.

It was too hard to make out anything more specific, but something was moving within. At the same time, the humming sound grew louder.

At that moment, Kakuta caught on. His stomach turned. "The Topsidans are lizards, right?" he said to his companions. "We've... We've landed in a pantry."

Morozova looked up from her tablet. "A pantry?"

He stood up straight again. "Live food. You know?"

The American remained impassive. "That doesn't really help us. If we had all the time in the world, we could poison it, but we have to be quick."

"I'm picking up some transmissions." Morozova raised the tablet to indicate what she meant. "Apparently, the *Kosan-Darrith* is about to launch."

It took a moment for Kakuta to grasp what that meant. Before the teleport, it had all happened so quickly. They'd only decided on the *Kosan-Darrith* at the very last second since it had been the smallest ship on the landing site. Fifteen meters long, five meters tall—still more than enough space for far too many Topsidans, but chances were good that it would have a small crew.

Could a ship like that fly with only a single pilot? Or did it need a copilot? Technicians? Were there passengers? Soldiers serving as escorts? Once he started to think about it, an endless number of incalculables appeared. A strange word popped into his mind: *imponderables.* His grandfather had often used that word, saying it in a tone as if he were proud of knowing it. The man had been thin, almost gaunt in appearance. *Oh, Kakuta, life is full of imponderables. You have to prepare yourself for that.*

As a child, he'd just nodded, not knowing what his grandpa meant. Now he knew. *Incalculables. Risks that can't be determined.* And indeed, his life was filled with far more imponderables than he grandfather could ever have dreamed.

"Let's hope none of the Topsidans on board gets hungry," Deringhouse said. It was probably supposed to be a joke, but Kakuta couldn't muster a laugh. "A pantry's not exactly the ideal hiding place for stowaways."

"We'll wait until the ship launches," he stressed again, "then strike right away. If we want to have a chance, it'll have to go quickly. I'll teleport onto the bridge with you, and we'll disable the crew. The *Kosan-Darrith* will be rudderless. You know what you have to do after that, right, Conrad?"

Deringhouse nodded. "Naturally. I take the pilot's seat, and hence the controls. I can..." He grew quieter and shut his eyes. "I'll manage it," he said, sounding as if he were trying to convince himself.

A jolt went through the room, almost imperceptible.

"Are we flying?" Kakuta asked.

Morozova kept her gaze fixed on the tablet. "Looks like it. We—" She didn't get any more words out. The exit hatch opened.

Kakuta considered taking himself and the others to safety by jumping to another room, but it would have been too risky, and it wasn't a real solution. The Topsidan might have seen them already, so he teleported anyway—directly behind the soldier.

He struck, pushing the alien into the room. The Topsidan tumbled forward, and Kakuta kicked him in the back of the knee. The soldier toppled but turned while falling, pulling out an energy weapon.

Deringhouse kicked his hand. The weapon flew out of the Topsidan's fingers and spun around in the air. Kakuta wanted to pounce on their opponent, but a strike from the lizard tail caught him just above his feet, on his ankles. Pain shot through the teleporter's lower legs as he buckled. As he hit the floor, he saw something hurtling towards the soldier.

Morozova smashed a supply box against the Topsidan's head. He made a dull sound, then lay there, motionless. Locust-like insects sprang out of the burst container and filled the room with the chirping Kakuta had initially taken for electrical humming. The box's moorings still hung on the wall; Morozova had simply ripped them in two.

"Remind me not to mess with you," Deringhouse said dryly as Kakuta closed the hatch again. "So, what do we do with him?"

"He can stay here," Kakuta decided and stood up. His ankles felt like they were on fire. He picked up the soldier's hand beamer. Two locusts were sitting right next to it on the floor; when he lifted the weapon, they jumped away and sat on the wall.

"Shooting him now would be murder," Morozova said plainly.

"I'm just taking precautions. Or do you have suitable ropes and a gag that we can use to bind him? So...does this weapon have a stun setting that will make sure he doesn't wake up again?"

"Give me the beamer," Morozova offered. "I understand a little of the Topsidian language and writing. Like I told you at the camp, it's important to get to know our enemy. The more we know, the better."

"You're right." Kakuta handed her the weapon. "I..." He stopped and started again. "I was wrong. You were acting correctly."

“Can you save that for later?” Deringhouse asked. “We can’t waste another second!”

Morozova aimed at the unconscious lizard and fired. A beam hit him, but otherwise nothing appeared to happen. “It’ll be a *long* time before he wakes up. Let’s go.”

They all drew their weapons and quickly agreed who would attack which Topsidan on the bridge. They positioned themselves back to back so they could see in three directions at once, with no blind spot. They established direct physical contact, and Kakuta teleported.

There were two enemies in her visual field. It could have been worse. Morozova fired, swung the weapon around, then fired again. One of her targets slumped down where he was, stupefied, but her other shot missed. The Topsidan leaped up, ran towards her, shoving her before she could pull the trigger again.

She dodged so that the hulking soldier didn’t crash into her with full force. Nonetheless, he caught her with an outstretched arm and pulled her with him. As she fell, she heard a loud cry. Kakuta? There was no time to think about that. Instinctively, she curled up, trying to protect her head. She landed with a thud.

A fist flew towards her, and she jerked her head to the side. The Topsidan roared as his fist rammed against the floor. Morozova pressed her beamer’s muzzle against his chest and fired.

Her opponent flinched, then the large body stiffened and fell on her like a dead weight. Holding her breath, she thrust him aside and pushed herself up onto her knees.

An alarm blared across the room.

Morozova raised her weapon and looked around.

“We’re good,” said Kakuta. “Conrad’s right, by the way. I *really* don’t want to mess with you. You’re the only one who had to deal with two at once. No problem for you, though, right?”

Oh, it was a problem, all right.

Relieved, she turned to face the teleporter. He was bleeding from a wound at his temple. Noticing where she was looking, his fingers felt cautiously at the injury. He twisted his face and inhaled with a hissing sound.

"It hurts like a bastard. When we materialized, this guy was standing right in front of me. He reacted unbelievably quickly."

The alarm stopped. Deringhouse, holding his hands over the control panel on one of the workstations, grinned with visible satisfaction. He pushed the motionless Topsidan out of the chair and sat there himself. "You two make sure none of them wake up anytime soon. I'll try to get a handle on this ship's controls and find out if there are other patrons on board." Without even turning around, he buried himself in the task.

Morozova exchanged a glance with Kakuta. "You keep an eye on the entrance to the bridge. We have to guard against any unpleasant surprises."

The teleporter agreed.

All the Topsidans had been immobilized with a stun beam. A second dose surely wouldn't kill any of them, Morozova decided. Four shots later, she was sure they'd have peace and quiet for a while.

"Looks good!" called Deringhouse from his station.

She turned to him. "You can steer the ship?"

"Hold your horses! I haven't gotten that far yet. But I have found a kind of emergency security to be used if the ship is boarded." Deringhouse grinned again, even wider this time. He looked like a boy who had unexpectedly found himself the hero of an action movie. It didn't at all fit with the pragmatic manner he'd shown on Pigell during the day. "As we speak, I'm flooding every room outside of the bridge with a knockout gas. Even if that alarm roused a whole battalion of soldiers in some barracks somewhere, we won't

need to worry about it at all."

"Unless they're wearing sealed space suits," Kakuta pointed out. "We should stay alert regardless. But let us worry about that. You focus on the controls. We need to get to the *Rugr-Krehn*."

"Don't let me disturb you," Morozova said, going to another workstation, "but I'll try to gain access to the ship's Positronic and look for information. We might need some kind of codeword or ID if we want to dock in Genkt-Tarm's battleship. We might even get some general idea about the Topsidian troops, how the battle is going, or about Perry Rhodan. His arrival must have had *some* impact."

She tried to forget about everything else around her. Kakuta would keep his eyes peeled in case there were any enemies still on board who hadn't passed out. Beyond that, she was placing her hope in that modicum of luck without which she'd never have gotten this far in the first place.

A sickly feeling rose up in her when she considered that a few minutes ago, Kakuta had made a blind jump onto the bridge with them. The element of surprise had helped them, but an old saying still came to mind: *fortune favors fools*. She wouldn't write that in her memoirs, if she ever got a chance to compose them.

She immersed herself in the work and gained access quite easily, in fact, since all the interfaces were still open. The Topsidan working at this station hadn't had time to disable it. Her first discovery was an order from the new high commander, Genkt-Tarm.

"Guys, listen to this. The Topsidans have called a temporary ceasefire. All combat operations are to be halted, and they should only strike back in full force if there's an attack from the Ferrons."

Kakuta clapped his hands in an unusually boisterous gesture. "That's Perry's doing for sure!"

"Which suggests his presence on the *Rugr-Krehn* had some success after all."

“Here’s hoping.”

Deringhouse stayed out of this conversation, seeming fully engrossed in the strange control system. It was better if he concentrated on his task anyway. If he didn’t manage to gain mastery over the *Kosan-Darrith*, their venture would be pointless. On top of that, they’d soon have to face the big problem of what to do with the temporarily stunned crew in the longer term. Morozova shuddered at the thought of having to take the Topsidans out of the equation *for good*.

“That’s it!” Deringhouse cried out of nowhere. “I can access the steering controls!”

A jolt ran through the bridge. “Braked a little suddenly there, but hopefully you can live with that. I’ll take us to our destination now! I understand the steering system, and it’s obeying me. Steering one of Earth’s rockets is significantly harder. The only thing I haven’t figured out yet is a scanner image of the surroundings. Otherwise I’ll have to fly blind.”

“I might be able to help you with that,” Morozova announced. “One moment.” She dug deeper into the Positronic’s memory banks and soon succeeded in projecting a hologram onto the bridge that interpreted the scanner data.

Her breath caught in her throat. The Vega system was a debris field. In a thousand places, wrecked ships or the remains of exploded spacecraft and space stations floated between the planets. Topsidan ships dominated the picture, certainly, but a second type of ship appeared by the dozens or hundreds as well.

Most notably, spindle ships many hundreds of meters long had gathered at the vast debris fields. The scanners delivered an automatic analysis and marked them as units belonging to the Fantan. Morozova had never heard of them, but that didn’t surprise her. She already knew that the Arkonides, Ferrons, and Topsidans were only the tip of the iceberg, and that there had to be countless other civilizations waiting for them in space.

She requested more information from the Positronic about the

Fantan and was informed that they were scavengers. They often appeared after space battles with the intention of plundering the wreckage and looking for suitable “Besun.” The computer didn’t provide an explanation for that word, however.

“We proceed as planned,” Kakuta decided after a moment. “These Fantan can only be to our advantage. They’ll distract the Topsidans. Maybe it’ll make them pay less attention to an insignificant auxiliary craft like the *Kosan-Darrith*.”

Deringhouse steered them in the direction of the *Rugr-Krehn*. Morozova transmitted their craft’s ID and requested permission to dock. To her surprise, they were granted it without issue.

“Time for the grand finale,” Deringhouse whispered as he steered the ship towards a hatch.

13.

Tricks at an End

Vega system, on board the Rugr-Krehn

Genkt-Tarm vanished, and with him the battleship's bridge. Perry Rhodan and Ras Tschubai materialized in a passageway. The Sudanese man made a choking sound and staggered, his back hitting the wall. Rhodan caught him, feeling the heavy, cold material of the Arkonide battledress the other man wore.

"I'm all right," the teleporter said softly, then murmured something else, of which Rhodan could only make out the word "exhausted."

"Where are the others?"

"Maintenance duct. Too far for me. We have a battledress for you there. Too heavy to..."

"I understand," Rhodan interrupted. "You couldn't take it with you when you jumped." Tschubai was visibly at the end of his strength; he likely shouldn't have been able to manage the last jump that had saved Rhodan's life. "I'll keep us safe. Can you operate the suit?"

The man nodded dully.

"Be ready. If worse comes to worst, we'll have to fully exploit the battledress's weapon systems regardless of the consequences."

At that moment, an alarm blared. Rhodan was only surprised it had taken so long for Genkt-Tarm to put the whole ship on alert. Tschubai silently passed him a hand beamer, and he took the weapon.

"Which way to where the others are hiding?"

"They're two decks up. I couldn't..."

“It’s fine, Ras.” Rhodan started running. They had to find an anti-grav shaft.

To his relief, Tschubai was able to follow him thanks to the Arkonide suit’s flight function. Under his own power, he probably would have struggled to walk.

The corridor branched off ahead of them. When they reached the crossing, an energy shot into the ground in front of Rhodan. The resulting finger-width hole dripped liquid metal from its edges.

The glaringly bright discharge blinded him for the blink of an eye. The next instant, Tschubai was standing in front of him, his suit’s shield flickering where a beam had struck. The teleporter fired back. The Topsidan jumped into an alcove for cover.

They rushed across the intersection, moving farther along the corridor. Rhodan kept an eye on their rear, shooting blindly a few times, but they reached another fork before their pursuer appeared again.

An entrance to an anti-grav shaft lay just a few meters ahead now. They had to go upwards, to Thora and the others. It wouldn’t be long now before a team of soldiers likely cornered them. From that moment on, they wouldn’t have the slightest chance. They were only still alive because everything had happened so quickly and because the Topsidans hadn’t reckoned with Tschubai’s intervention.

But their lucky streak ended that very same moment. Someone stepped out of the anti-grav shaft. Rhodan raised his weapon. They’d be able to win against one Topsidan if he wasn’t wearing a battledress with the shield activated. Maybe even two, but if...

Rhodan stopped himself at the last moment and lowered his weapon when he recognized Wuriu Sengu. The mutant handed him an Arkonide battledress, which he wouldn’t have been able to transport without wearing one of those technical marvels himself. By now, Rhodan was well practiced at putting on one of the fifty-kilogram armored suits in a hurry.

“When I saw that Ras couldn’t jump back, I set out right away,” Wuriu said. “We have to get back as quickly as possible. Chaktor and Lossoshér are waiting for us.”

“Where’s Thora?” Rhodan asked curtly as he closed the helmet with hand motions and set up an ongoing com link between Wuriu, Tschubai, and himself.

“She’s still out planting a few bombs. As a distraction, just in case.”

They had to get into the anti-grav shaft. Since the teleporter was still teetering on the edge of fainting, Rhodan took him along via parallel control. Wuriu already had one leg in the upwardly polarized field when he leapt back. “Topsidans! We have to get away!” He floated off at high speed. Rhodan followed with Tschubai in tow.

A moment later, they realized they’d fallen into a trap. Soldiers were rushing towards them, each wearing battledresses. They fired.

The three fugitives fired back, but it was hopeless. They couldn’t break through. They lost ground, evading backwards, and no sooner did they approach the anti-grav shaft than they were under further fire from there.

It was three of them against an army of trained soldiers. All the miraculous Arkonide technology they had couldn’t help them, especially since their opponents had tech that was only very slightly inferior to that of the Arkonides—not to mention the Topsidans’ overwhelmingly greater numbers.

“Thora!” Wuriu suddenly called out. Was evidently in touch with the Arkonide via com. “Now!”

Not five seconds later, explosions rocked the ship. The ground shook, and a metallic screeching and bursting thundered in the distance.

The Topsidans held their fire. They were visibly surprised and confused. The three friends seized the opportunity and flew off at

full speed, directly towards the enemy's phalanx.

A shot smashed into the shield of Rhodan's battledress, then a second. All of a sudden, the Topsdians were directly in front of him.

His defensive shield collided with another, crackling as lightning flashed; it stank of burning and ozone. He heard Wuriu cry out. Beams whizzed in all directions. One Topsidan's shield ruptured, and for a moment Rhodan stared into the widened eyes of his lizard face, before the Topsidan disappeared in a cloud of blood and they were through.

Together, they hurtled onwards, not turning around even once.

The death trap was behind them, but they had no destination to head for. Even if they managed to join up with Thora and the others, they were trapped on the *Rugr-Krehn*, the center of enemy power. Rhodan had no bluff left to play, no teleporter waiting in the wings to come and free them. Their tricks were at an end. All that counted now were the facts, and those looked exceptionally ugly.

"Where are you, Thora?" Wuriu asked.

"The meeting point we agreed on," she replied. "With Chaktor and Lossoshér."

Hearing her voice came as a relief to Rhodan. As the former commander of an Arkonide ship, she had more experience than the rest of them put together. Knowing she was nearby kept his last ray of hope from vanishing.

A moment later, it was snuffed out regardless.

A shimmering energy shield formed in front of them, blocking their path. The Topsidans knew where they were. The humans fired at it in unison, hoping they could overload the immaterial barrier and make it collapse.

Their shots had no effect.

A second energy shield came online—behind them. They were cornered, and Topsidian soldiers were approaching from both sides.

This time the game was finally up.

The teleporter touched him. “I’ll get us out of here safely.”

“Ras, you can’t—” Rhodan began.

“Wuriu, direct physical contact!” Tschubai demanded.

The mutant hesitated.

“Come on!”

Wuriu obeyed his urging.

An instant later, Tschubai groaned. Through the teleporter’s visor, Rhodan could see blood shooting out of his nose. Ras opened his mouth, drew in breath, and coughed painfully. A gurgling sound was followed by vomit gushing from his mouth, and he slumped over, unconscious. Only the battledress, still controlled by Rhodan, kept him upright.

“He had to try,” said Wuriu.

Rhodan nodded. “I’d have done the same.”

“Take off the battledresses,” ordered a Topsidan on the other side of one of the shields. “Now!”

Rhodan knew when it was over. Maybe they could survive if they surrendered and gave themselves up. True, it seemed senseless to bet on Genkt-Tarm’s mercy after everything that had happened, but it was better than being immediately shot. By now, at least two dozen heavily armed Topsidans stood behind each of the two energy curtains.

He and Wuriu took off their Arkonide suits, then got the unconscious Tschubai out of his.

The energy walls faded as the Topsidans prepared to capture the humans. Only a miracle could save them now.

The miracle happened. Suddenly, they were not a group of three,

but of four. A man materialized in front of them: slim, black-haired, and almost a head shorter than Rhodan.

“Kakuta?” Rhodan asked, disbelieving. “Where did you come fr__”

“Later!” The Japanese teleporter twisted his mouth into a fierce smile. He reached out to touch his three companions and jumped with them.

Our tricks aren’t at an end after all, Rhodan thought as his surroundings dissolved.

14.

Worse Than This

Vega system, on board the Tosoma

Pounder was looking at a debris field that extended into infinity. *A graveyard for spacecraft,* he thought.

He'd flown in the *Tosoma* to an alien solar system, crossing a chasm of space so vast that his mind hesitated to accept the jump as a reality. But Vega, the enormous, pale blue sun, spoke for itself, as did the almost uncountable number of planets and moons and the rubble that floated in space, cold and dead.

This was real, and he didn't have time to stop and think about it. The present took all his attention. He was the ship's commander, and couldn't let himself be distracted by emotions. Every single person on board was counting on him. *Depending* on him, even. They'd put their lives in his hands, and he had to own that responsibility. Because whatever war had created this graveyard, it wasn't over yet. Far too many ships were flying through the gaps between planets, shuttling from world to world.

Life, Pounder thought, and the concept overwhelmed him. *There's life everywhere.* Death was equally present, however. Escape pods were hidden among the debris. Distress calls arrived, spoken in an incomprehensible language.

"There are forty-two planets," the Positronic informed him in an apparently automatic process. "Many are inhabited and orbited by moons. The precise evaluation is in progress."

"Irrelevant," Pounder interrupted. "I need to know more about the types of ships."

"The Fantan ship that was previously threatening Terrania is approaching the twenty-fourth planet," it reported. "A further 418 Fantan units have been detected so far. Most of the destroyed ships

belong to the people inhabiting this solar system."

"The most prominent type of ship," Crest said when the soulless computer paused for a moment, "belongs to the Topsidian people. A lizard-like species that doesn't know compassion in the human or Arkonide sense. Evidently, they've come to this system as invaders."

"What do you know about the native population?"

"Nothing, as I already told you on Earth. They are unknown to me. However, the reason the Fantan have flown here goes without saying."

"A theater of war like this has more Besun than they could ever hope for." Bitterness marked Allan Mercant's voice. "A lot of ships to plunder."

More readings came in, which the ship's Positronic converted into realistic holograms. Strange light effects appeared on some planets. Pounder zoomed in on one of those worlds: it was the twelfth of the system, orbited by three moons. The holo image showed both that planet and the fourteenth as they circled around the sun. The planet between them was at another point in its orbit, almost on the opposite side of the gigantic star.

Goosebumps crawled up Pounder's neck as he realized what was causing this light show. A firestorm of immense proportions was rampaging on one of the moons, which was clearly settled. A whole continent was burning. From the distance, it looked like nothing much—just a light effect. For the moon's inhabitants, it was an indescribable catastrophe.

"What the hell happened here?" he exclaimed.

He wasn't expecting an answer, but Crest delivered an explanation anyway. "Everything you see here is the result of a war between starfaring peoples that's shaking this solar system. It's atrocious, yes...but as an Arkonide, I know that such battles are an evident part of the laws that govern the universe." He lowered his voice, and his lips trembled. "And my people have done worse than this, much as I regret it."

“Even you yourself, Crest?”

The Arkonide fell silent.

The Postrionic reported more Fantan ships materializing between Vega’s worlds in quick succession. Not far from them, one of the familiar auxiliary craft flounders flew out from a giant spindle ship. It sped towards a wreckage that was still half intact but black with what looked like soot.

In that moment, Pounder grasped more clearly than before that, in the end, the Fantan had only spared his world because, comparatively, *there wasn’t much there to take*. The war zone in the Vega system promised a significantly richer yield.

A new hologram appeared, depicting a blue-skinned being similar to a human. According to the com data they had picked up, this was one of the system’s inhabitants. The people called themselves Ferrons, and their members appeared to be somewhat shorter than humans but with brawnier builds.

Pounder was still far from understanding everything playing out in front of him. “No one seems to care that we showed up. Isn’t that weird in the middle of a war?”

“Maybe we can thank the general chaos for that,” the Arkonide replied. “And the fact that we’ve kept quiet until now, no doubt. Aside from that, not a single Topsidian ship is attacking any of the Ferron worlds.”

“Is the war over?” Mercant asked. “Or is there a ceasefire?”

Pounder shrugged. “Without more information, no one can answer that.”

The scanners were still gathering more data, but the abundance of ships and planets made it tough to get a meaningful overview.

So, this was the solar system where the distress call had originated. The one that had led Rhodan and the others aboard the *Good Hope* here. A distress call sent on an ancient Arkonide frequency. That part remained a puzzle and still seemed

irreconcilable with the harrowing sight afforded to the humans on the *Tosoma*.

Rhodan's fate, however, seemed clear now. There was an all-too-plain and obvious reason he hadn't come back to Earth. The *Good Hope* must have gotten mixed up in the Topsidans' invasion of the Vega system and been ground to dust between the fronts. Even after a targeted search, the ship could not be found anywhere.

Crest remained silent as the humans feverishly searched for any trace of the *Good Hope*. He remained silent as it became clear that, in all probability, the ship no longer existed. And he remained silent in his sorrow and grief over the loss of Thora, the young, proud Arkonide he had taken in as his daughter and loved as such.

"Crest!"

He heard Lesly Pounder's voice like a distant sound that hardly reached him. He allowed himself this moment of grief, and he owed it to Thora, without whom he'd have died in the *Aetron* on the Terran Moon. Just as he wouldn't have survived without Perry Rhodan, when they had made first contact with the humans. What an irony that they had both lost their lives on the same ship, perhaps even at the same moment. Did one of the countless debris fields in this war-torn solar system consist of the *Good Hope*'s remains?

"Crest!" Pounder called again. "Take a look at this!"

He wrenched himself out of his sorrow and looked up.

"The scanners have found an Arkonide battleship."

The news struck him to his core and awakened new hope. "Did it intervene in favor of the *Good Hope*?" *And did Thora, Rhodan, and the others escape onto that ship? Are they still alive?*

Obviously, Pounder couldn't answer that question. Not yet. "I'm trying to establish a com link. So far, they aren't responding. Maybe it's better if you talk to them, Crest. Arkonide to Arkonide."

He agreed and took over communication. “My name is Crest da Zoltral. I’m the scientific leader of the Arkonide research cruiser *Aetron*, commanded by...” He faltered a moment. “By my daughter, Thora da Zoltral. Come in, please.”

No one replied, but Crest could still pick up the unit’s ID signature, which identified it as the *Rugr-Krehn*. He’d never heard of a battleship by that name.

Why wasn’t the crew responding? It was strange enough that the ship wasn’t sending the automatic identifier of the imperial fleet. Crest’s hope that this ship could have been a lifeline for those missing was diminishing by the moment.

The *Tosoma* flew closer to the *Rugr-Krehn*. Pounder smoothly steered around the debris and the Topsidian units, which were behaving surprisingly passively. Crest was pleased to observe that Pounder was assiduously keeping outside of the battleship’s targeting range.

Minutes passed that felt like hours as the Positronic sent the request for contact in an endless loop.

“We have to board them,” the elderly Arkonide said finally.

The commander shook his head, his lips pressed together, a sad expression in his eyes. “That’s impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible! You and your men have this ship at your disposal. Use the possibilities it offers. You can disable any enemy.”

“It may be that we can destroy the *Rugr-Krehn*,” Pounder conceded, “but what would we gain from that?”

“You shouldn’t destroy it. But whoever’s in there...they must know that you *could*. You bow to no one, Mr. Pounder. Not in this ship.”

“The *Rugr-Krehn* is at least on par with us.”

“But we do present a serious danger to it.”

Before the commander could say another word, the scanners detected a shaking in the unknown ship—a sudden energy burst that ended just as abruptly.

"An explosion on board the *Rugr-Krehn*!" Crest wondered what could be happening over there.

Pounder switched on a com link that made his next sentence heard across the entire ship. "Tatiana Michalovna, please come to me right away."

The Arkonide was stunned for a moment before he understood. "A good idea."

Pounder nodded wordlessly. Just then, another detonation shook the *Rugr-Krehn*, followed by a third straight afterwards. Crest stared at the hologram as it showed a section of the hull breaking off. A scrap of metal tore away, shooting into space at high speed. For a few seconds, atmosphere hissed out of the leak, which (according to the soulless preciseness of the scanner) measured twenty centimeters by thirty with an irregular outline.

The burst of oxygen and nitrogen froze into a bizarre column in space, which then burst apart and floated away in tiny fragments. A wall of energy closed the *Rugr-Krehn*'s leak, but inside the battleship, further explosions erupted—two, three—before calm returned.

Michalovna entered the bridge and hurried over to them. The telepath briefly looked Crest in the eye. She was one of the few who knew the true reason the *Aetron* had come to this far-flung corner of the Milky Way. She had read it in his thoughts while interrogating a captive Crest on behalf of the mutant Clifford Monterny. The nefarious Monterny had gotten the end he deserved—and Michalovna had switched over to Rhodan's side. Though eyed with suspicion at first, by now she was a valued teammate. Not least by Crest himself.

She looked at him with wide eyes. For a brief moment, she seemed to have turned to stone, then she smiled. Crest briefly thought he saw mockery in her countenance, but her first words

changed that appraisal.

"Over this kind of distance?" she asked. "That's simply not possible, even if you fly so close that you're practically touching their hull! Our ship already has too many people thinking, and it won't be any different there."

"Slow down," Crest interrupted. "That's enough insistence that you can't do it. I disagree."

"You're not a telepath."

"But I am an old man who's seen a lot and knows a lot. I don't see anything as impossible anymore." He'd hardly said it before it occurred to him that he'd said the same thing to Pounder just moments earlier. "Tatiana, you should expand the boundaries you box yourself into. Don't make yourself a prisoner of your own limited imagination."

He didn't expect any dissent, but the telepath was silent.

Instead, Pounder spoke again. "You don't have to target anyone specific and read their thoughts. But we need to know who's on that ship in general. Arkonides? Topsidans? Or maybe even..."

"Our friends," said Michalovna, finishing the sentence. "That's what this is about, right? You're looking for Perry Rhodan, Thora, and the others."

"Are you brave enough to try?"

She closed her eyes and concentrated. "Crest, take me as close to the *Tosoma*'s outer hull as possible. Captain, you fly as near to the other ship as you can."

"Understood," said the two men simultaneously.

The Arkonide set out with the telepath right away. They kept a line open with Pounder the entire time. After leaving the innermost spherical shell, they crossed through the middle one, which contained the propulsion unit facilities. When they reached the outer shell, Crest gave the go-ahead.

The *Tosoma* raced off toward the mysterious Arkonide ship. Tatiana reached out with both hands and supported herself against the corridor wall. Again, she closed her eyes and concentrated. It looked as though she wanted to physically feel what was happening on the *Rugr-Krehn*. As if she were trying to reach into the other ship. With her mind, she was doing exactly that.

She tensed up. The veins on the backs of her hands protruded visibly. Her knuckles turned white. Her eyelids fluttered, and suddenly she turned her head and looked at Crest. “It’s true. They’re over there.”

15.

Reunion

Vega system, on board the Rugr-Krehn

Thora looked at him.

She smiled, just for the blink of an eye, making Rhodan wonder if he'd imagined it. In the cramped passage, the ceiling hung so low that he could hardly stand upright.

Tako Kakuta sat down. The teleporter was breathing hurriedly with his mouth open. He raised his right hand and wiped it across his lips.

Rhodan thanked him while simultaneously seeing to the still-unconscious Tschubai. The man's condition was stable, his pulse weak but regular. The jump must have cost him a great deal of strength. He'd saved Wuriu, Tschubai, and Rhodan at the last second.

The teleporter leaned back even further, groaned, and finally lay down on his back. His hands were moving erratically. He drew in his knees. His eyes rolled and all color drained from his face.

Thora kneeled down beside him. "His circulation is collapsing."

"I... I can manage, Arkonide," Tako breathed.

"I may be an Arkonide," she replied, impassive, "but I'm familiar enough with your species by now to know that you almost went too far. You have to be careful, Kakuta."

"It was worth it," Wuriu asserted soberly. "We owe you our lives, Tako."

Thora turned to the side and said something to herself, so softly that Rhodan couldn't hear. He spent a moment in confusion before he realized she was giving orders to her battledress's Positronic.

“Help me put Kakuta in one of the suits. Earlier, when he suddenly appeared in front of us, he refused because it would mean transporting even weight during the jump to you.”

Rhodan watched in wonder as the Ferron Chaktor brought over another space suit and fulfilled Thora’s request.

“How did Tako even find us in the first place? How did he get onto the *Rugr-Krehn*?”

The teleporter breathed heavily as Chaktor heaved his upper body into the suit. He tried to say something, but Thora interrupted him. “You already gave us that information. Let me speak now. Putting on a brave face in your situation is unnecessary vanity. You’ll be better soon.”

Rhodan suspected what she was planning and didn’t interfere.

“Tako Kakuta hijacked a Topsidian craft along with Darya Morozova and Conrad Deringhouse. It’s waiting in one of the *Rugr-Krehn*’s hangars.”

“Darya and Conrad,” Rhodan repeated. “What about Rod and Anne?”

“Rod... Rod is dead.” The teleporter said it quietly, as if he didn’t want it to be true. “And Anne... Ane...” A coughing fit robbed him of his voice. He doubled over in pain.

“Later, Tako,” Thora said, gently but firmly. “Listen to me! I’ve had an injection prepared that I’ll administer to you now. I programmed my suit’s med unit accordingly and it will transfer it to your systems. You’ll soon feel better.”

Rhodan thought he heard a light hissing sound, though he wasn’t completely sure. The Japanese man’s coughing subsided, and a glazed expression found his eyes.

At the same moment, Tschubai woke up. Thora turned to him. “Chaktor, can you equip him with a suit as well, please? We’ll repeat the procedure.” This teleporter’s suit had stayed behind between the two energy walls as well.

“Absolutely.” The Ferron retrieved another battledress and started the same process over again. He explained to the Sudanese man what they were doing.

Rhodan turned his attention to Kakuta, who looked as though he could speak for himself again. “You hijacked a ship? And it’s waiting for us?”

The teleporter nodded. “We have the official identifier, so they let us dock without issue. At least, when I teleported away from there, no one had bothered us yet, even after landing. The only question is how we’ll get to the hangar. Even with this injection, I’m far too weak to take you all there, and clearly Ras isn’t doing any better.”

Rhodan shook his head. “Quite the opposite.”

“At most, I can jump into the hangar once,” Kakuta said, “with one other person.”

“That’s not an option,” Rhodan stated categorically. “We’ll have to fight our way through somehow.”

“Across the whole ship?” Thora asked skeptically. “The hangar’s all the way on the other side. It’s more than five hundred meters from here to there, and every Topsidan on board is looking for us. With all the optimism imaginable, we have no chance. Even this hiding place will soon be found and overrun.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Rhodan asked. “Give up?”

Thora’s expression grew taut. “Never. I’d die before giving up. I’ve positioned enough bombs to cause plenty of damage if I denotate them remotely. The *Rugr-Krehn* will survive them, but it’ll be half wrecked. Only, that doesn’t help *us*. The Topsidans will track us down and kill us. Nonetheless…as soon as the two teleporters can move, we should get going. We don’t have any other options left.”

An idea suddenly came to the Arkonide. “Rhodan, get everything

ready. Everyone needs to be wearing an intact battledress. Test the functionality. Chaktor and Lossoshér know what weapons we have available. Find the optimal way to divide them up."

"What are you going to do, Thora?"

"I have some last preparations of my own to take care of. Tako, can you manage one small jump? Just you and me?"

The teleporter hesitated. "Where to?"

"A secondary com station. With a little luck, it won't be manned. It'll be approximately sixty meters from here."

Kakuta confirmed. Thora extended her arm, prompting him.

"What are you going to do?" Rhodan asked.

"I'll explain later."

Kakuta touched her arm, she gave him an exact description of the place, and they teleported. To her relief, the station was unmanned.

"Keep an eye on the entrance!" she said before getting to work. She quickly found the access point she was hoping for and coupled the low-performance com device built into her suit with the transmission and reception system there. Since both were Arkonide technology, it worked without issue. Interfacing only took a few seconds. Now, she would be able to access the ship's coms through her battledress.

Her companion didn't ask any questions, which she appreciated, as it meant she could focus on her task. In a few more steps, she shielded the connection so that the Topsidans wouldn't be able to trace it back without some difficulty.

She turned to Kakuta. "Let's go back."

Seconds later, they were standing among the rest of the group in the maintenance duct again. Thora was relieved to see they still hadn't been discovered. They were all waiting to strike out—to

begin their desperate attempt to cross almost the entire enemy ship.

Thora explained now why she had gone to the com station and what she had achieved there. “We have to grasp at every straw. I’ll send out a distress call. The Ferrons aren’t quite as helpless as the Topsidans would like. And for you, Rhodan, they’d brave anything.”

“Not for me. If anything, for the mythical being from their lore that will bring the light back to them.”

“For you,” Chaktor said, repeating her words unwaveringly. “You are the Lightbringer, Rhodan!”

Thora smiled as he said it.

“I’m amazed,” said Rhodan.

“Excuse me?” she replied.

“You’re smiling for longer than the blink of an eye.”

This statement confused her. “I’ll set up the distress call. After that, we should set out right away. Deringhouse and Morozova are waiting.”

“You sound a lot more confident,” Rhodan remarked. “I like that.”

“Oh, really?” Thora focused on sending out the distress signal. She included a personal description, although she wasn’t counting on anyone picking up their message and replying.

The group left its hiding place, which she was convinced didn’t offer them safety anymore anyway. Seven people against a host of enemies. Two of their group were teleporters and thus secret weapons in a sense, but both were on the verge of collapse. Neither Tschubai nor Kakuta would have the strength for another jump.

It became clear all too quickly that they were no match for their opponents’ superior numbers. No sooner had they left their base than an alarm blared across the passageway they were racing along at high speed. A robot emerged from an alcove a few meters ahead.

It raised a weapon arm and shot immediately.

Its volley fizzled out against Rhodan's shield; he and Thora formed the vanguard of their formation. The two of them fired back. Lossoshér caught up and joined them. For the last few hours, the elderly transmitter guardian had been taking it easy. Now that they were going up against the lizards who had devastated his people, his hate seemed to lend him unforeseen strength.

Chaktor ran ahead, opening fire as well. The combat machine detonated under their concentrated fire. Metal shards sprayed in all directions; a sharp fragment scraped across the ceiling and shattered the covering of a light fixture. Blue sparks rained down.

They'd survived this first meaningless attack. Thora knew it had only been a taster.

As soon as they passed the smoking remains, the rangefinder picked up more combat robots approaching apace. Topsididan troops were following them. How could they possibly have supposed, even in the tiniest corners of their minds, that they might reach the hangar? They would meet their fates long before that. The Topsidans had years of military experience, while they were just a few hopeless insurgents driven by courage and desperation.

Thora mentally readied herself for their last stand. Then, she received the message.

"Thora da Zoltral?"

Rhodan immediately recognized the voice he received over the permanent com link with Thora and the others. But it was impossible. The man he thought he heard *couldn't* be speaking to them. It was a dream. Only a dream.

"This is Lesly K. Pounder speaking. I've taken command of the Arkonide battleship *Tosoma*. We're not far from you. We already know that you're on board the *Rugr-Krehn* thanks to the telepath Tatiana Michalovna. We received your distress call. Do you read me?"

"I read you."

How could she stay so levelheaded? Rhodan could hardly make sense of it. Pounder, of all people, was in the Vega system? In an Arkonide battleship, which—on top of everything—*he* commanded?

"We require urgent assistance," Thora continued. "We're surrounded by Topsidans."

Pounder's answer was a disappointment. "Our hands are tied. We've already approached the *Rugr-Krehn* once, and the response came in the form of an immense assault that we only barely withstood."

"Can you send a boarding party?"

"Negative. We—"

"Then destroy the *Rugr-Krehn*," Thora interrupted. "That will put a major halt to the Topsidian advance. I've placed quite a number of bombs I can detonate from here. It should make the rest child's play for you."

"First we have to evacuate you."

"No hope of that. The Topsidans are moving closer."

Rhodan listened to the conversation, spellbound, as they continued along their way. As if to confirm Thora's last statement, a beam was fired their way.

"Defensive formation!" he ordered.

Everyone moved closer together, making their shields form an almost closed-off wall of energy. But it wouldn't hold up forever. Under concentrated fire, it would break down quickly.

A shootout began. No one could take cover; the passageway offered no opportunity for that. The shields were still holding on both their side and the Topsidans'.

A robot was stomping closer and firing relentlessly. The machine

had a massive advantage over them: it didn't fear for its life.

Thora hurled something egg-shaped at the robot. The bomb, akin to a hand grenade, collided with the floor directly in front of it and exploded. The shockwave reached them and fizzled out almost entirely against their defensive shields. Rhodan felt only a light impact, as if a child had punched him in the chest. Flames raged as high as the ceiling; dark smoke floated up and spread out. When the plumes dissipated, only a pile of scrap metal remained, melted and blasted to bits.

"What's happening over there?" Pounder asked, audible dismay in his voice.

"The Topsidans are smoking us out," Thora summarized curtly. "Again, Pounder—I'll trigger the bombs now. Destroy the *Rugr-Krehn*. With your battleship, you can drive off the invaders. By dealing with the *Rugr-Krehn*, you'd cut the head off the Topsidans' power in this system. If you don't hesitate now, you'll save the Ferrons."

"No, Thora!"

"Do it!"

"Hear me out! And can Rhodan hear me too?"

"Yes," Rhodan confirmed as he shot at Topsidans in battledresses. It was pure insanity. This wasn't the advance into space he'd spent his whole life dreaming of. War and destruction had never appeared in those fantasies.

"As we speak, a large Fantan ship is approaching the *Rugr-Krehn*," Pounder explained. "Tatiana found out with her gift that we have friends on board."

"Friends?"

"She doesn't know any more. She couldn't find out who it is or read any specific thoughts. Only that beings with a friendly attitude towards us are present on the Fantan spindle. The Topsidans are already firing on it, but the ship is not turning around."

“That doesn’t sound like the Fantan,” Thora remarked. “Why should they put themselves in harm’s way? There are a thousand places nearby with more than enough Besun for them.”

Rhodan listened to their discussion without understanding. Clearly, since he’d last seen Pounder, the man had gained some experience with this alien people known as the Fantan. He was speaking as if he had a deep familiarity with them. Rhodan, on the other hand, had only recently heard their name for the first time...on the bridge, from Genkt-Tarm’s mouth.

“The Fantan ship’s hull is rupturing!” Pounder exclaimed, agitated. “Half of the spindle is exploding!”

Rhodan pictured the inferno, though he could neither see nor hear any of it. For him, the entire universe consisted only of beam fire and close-quarters combat with the Topsidans.

For Thora, that was the signal to go. She triggered the detonators of the bombs she had set up. Distant thunder filled the ship. Everything quaked. But nothing else happened. Not there. Elsewhere on the *Rugr-Krehn*, however, fire and destruction would be rampaging now. The enormous spacesphere was teetering on the edge of doom.

Should they give themselves up? After the twofold fiasco for the Topsidans, with Rhodan now have been rescued from seemingly inescapable situations by teleporters twice, he and his companions wouldn’t exactly be given another chance, let alone shown mercy.

With death in front of his eyes, he deeply regretted the way that humanity had made contact with extraterrestrial intelligence. He ached for every individual who had trusted him and whom he had led to death at this moment.

Sparks flew.

It couldn’t be.

Not again!

“Sid!” he cried. “What... What are you doing here?”

A young man had materialized in front of him. Wiry, almost emaciated, and with brown skin. Sid González, the young teleporter who had saved him and Bull from the mutant Clifford Monterny. The teleporter who had stayed behind on Earth when they had set out for Vega on the *Good Hope*.

"What do you think?" Sid smirked. "Saving your asses."

"Did you come here on the *Tosoma*?"

"Nope, we—"

Sid stopped short when the air beside him suddenly shimmered. Another teleporter materialized. It wasn't a human, but a furry creature that looked like a cross between a mouse walking on its hind legs and a beaver. It was as tall as Sid's chest, and a single incisor jutted from its mouth.

"Allow me to introduce our new friend, Gucky!" Sid announced.

"Savior of the Universe," the creature squeaked, raising one of his paws. A long tail tapped against Sid's legs. "And of you guys while I'm at it." Gucky moved his paw and one of the combat robots lifted off the ground.

"What..." Thora began.

"Telekinesis," he said nonchalantly. "I don't actually need to wave my hand, by the way. That was just for show."

The robot floated backwards, crashed against the ceiling, and exploded. Pieces of debris rained down on the soldiers, partly burning up against their shields and partly being deflected and flung aside.

At the same instant, the Topsidans toppled over, one after the other, and stopped firing.

Sid laughed cockily. "Gucky's a multi-mutant. Telekinesis, telepathy, teleportation..." He turned to the furry creature. "But you have to be careful! Don't overdo it."

The alien's single tooth flashed. "Good call."

Rhodan wondered how the situation had taken this turn. Were Sid and Gucky not taking this seriously at all? Not to mention how inconceivable it was that the two of them could appear out of nowhere and save them from the Topsidans.

Out of nowhere? No, not at all. They must have traveled here in the Fantan ship Pounder had mentioned. The former NASA man and now commander of the *Tosoma* was still connected to them via com. From him, they learned that the *Rugr-Krehn*'s hull had been breached in three locations. The scanners were also reading extensive damage across the whole ship.

"Gucky!" Rhodan called. "Sid! Can you teleport again?"

"Of course," they both answered as if from one mouth. "Gucky's the only one who can remotely measure up to me when it comes to that," Sid added.

Rhodan seized this unique opportunity, and mere seconds later, the chaos disappeared from around him. With a single teleport, Sid and Gucky took the entire group into the ship where Deringhouse and Morozova were waiting on tenterhooks. Their hangar hadn't been directly impact by the destruction from Thora's bombs, but of course, the inferno hadn't gone unnoticed by them.

Over the com link, Pounder kept them abreast of what was going on out in space. Despite his flagship's woeful condition, Genkt-Tarm was attacking the *Tosoma*. An apocalyptic battle was raging between the two Arkonide spacespheres—but, thanks to Thora's internal sabotage, it was already clear who would win. Still, Pounder held off on completely destroying his enemy to give Rhodan and his group the chance to escape in their auxiliary craft.

"If everyone's here," said Conrad, "we should skedaddle as quickly as possible!" He was sitting at a console and tapping on the panels as if he'd been doing nothing else his entire life.

"Not yet!" Rhodan turned to the diminutive alien. "Gucky, do you still have the strength for at least two more jumps?"

The “Savior of the Universe” crossed his arms boastfully in front of his chest. “Sure I can!”

He and Sid vanished. Two minutes later, the boy materialized again in their ship with two Topsidans in tow: the high commander, Genkt-Tarm, and the Wise One, Trker-Hon. Before the pair of Topsidans could even grasp what had happened to them, Rhodan and Thora stunned them with their beamers.

“Where’s Gucky?” Rhodan asked.

“I don’t know!” Sid replied. “He said he still had to take care of something—and that we should launch without him! Then he disappeared.”

Rhodan didn’t like the thought of leaving behind someone who had just saved his life. But he had no other choice. They couldn’t stay a moment longer if they wanted any chance of escaping the inferno.

Deringhouse launched the craft. They left the *Rugr-Krehn* behind them as new detonations continued to shake it. They had hardly cleared the Topsidian flagship when it exploded in a massive fireball that suffocated in the vacuum of space.

At that same instant, the air shimmered on the auxiliary craft’s bridge. Gucky materialized—and he wasn’t alone.

“Anne!” Kakuta exclaimed. “You’re alive!” He rushed towards the telekinetic woman he had thought dead and held his arms out to her. Anne Sloane rested in them. She smiled.

Rhodan walked over to the second person Gucky had rescued from the exploding battleship. He had blue skin, copper hair, and a third eye on his forehead.

“It’s an honor to finally meet you, Thort!”

16.

Peace Talks

Vega system, on board the Tosoma

In the background, a wideband hologram showed the *Rugr-Krehn*'s destruction. The *Tosoma*'s external cameras had recorded it, and Rhodan was very consciously displaying this moment to his two prisoners in brutal fashion.

Genkt-Tarm and Trker-Hon were watching the recording, but they gave no indication of what they felt upon seeing it. At least, Rhodan could only read their body language and facial expressions with great difficulty, if at all. In the next room, however, unknown to the two Topsidans, the telepaths Tatiana Michalovna and Gucky were listening in on the lizard beings' thoughts. They would alert Rhodan if he drew any mistaken conclusions. Or so Rhodan hoped, anyway. They didn't have any practical experience when it came to human telepaths and aliens like the lizards.

As for Gucky, he had certainly saved their lives, and Rhodan's old crewmates, Reginald Bull and Eric Manoli, who had been abducted by the Fantan as Besun, insisted that the furry creature could be trusted without hesitation, yet it was possible the Topsidans would confound him.

"There's no need to show me my own defeat," Genkt-Tarm said. "I know when I've lost. Something else interests me far more. Why did you send that little creature to rescue me from the ship? You could have allowed me to die."

The high commander was sitting next to Trker-Hon at a table in a large meeting room on the *Tosoma*. They weren't bound, though this did nothing to hide their status as prisoners. Armed guards stood by the exit, not letting them out of their sight for a second.

"Don't your own Social Directives say you're supposed to respect life?" Rhodan asked. "That matches my own way of thinking. It

doesn't help anyone if a *third* commander is chosen out of your ranks. Your most powerful instrument of war has been taken from you, but you still have plenty of ships in this solar system."

Genkt-Tarm leaned forward. The claws of his right hand scraped across the table. "Again, Rhodan. Why did you save us? *What do you want?*"

"Isn't it obvious?" Trker-Hon interjected. "He's seeking peace."

"Exactly," said the Thort thought dead by his people, sitting opposite the two Topsidans. He had been saved from the slowly crumbling battleship by Gucky, along with Anne Sloane, although she wasn't taking part in this meeting. "And I seek it too," he added.

"So, let's talk about peace," said Rhodan, and for the first time in ages, everything felt right.

Trker-Hon followed these developments with excitement. Perry Rhodan was very odd indeed.

"This war is unnecessary," Rhodan insisted. He looked like a pale Ferron, but he was far more than that. "By now, you know that I'm not the mythical savior from Ferron lore. I didn't come to bring back the light. At least, not the way the Ferrons assumed. Nonetheless, I ask you to stop and think. Genkt-Tarm...Trker-Hon...doesn't this war represent endless sorrow? There are millions dead on both sides. A lot of Topsidans have died too. And for what? Nothing!"

"The Vega system is within the Topsidans' lawful sphere of influence," Genkt-Term responded. "It must therefore submit to our rule. As long as the Ferrons resist, we are forced to employ violence."

Fool, Trker-Hon thought. *We're long past that stage,* Primitive arguments wouldn't work around this table. Humble soldiers might believe it, but these words insulted the intelligence of someone like Perry Rhodan, or even the Thort.

“That aside,” the Wise One therefore said, “this war is about putting the Vega system’s resources in Topsidian hands.” That was the version their officers knew. Trker-Hon was eager to see what Rhodan made of it.

“One very special resource above all,” Rhodan replied. “Am I right?”

Genkt-Tarm’s tongue swung around in front of his mouth for a moment. He was nervous; he felt cornered and threatened. A typical mistake for him. Unlike Trker-Hon, he didn’t understand that the times had changed. That an entirely new situation had come about.

It had been proven once again that without the Wise One’s advice, the military was doomed to failure from the start. They had to seize the opportunity Rhodan was offering them. The chance for *all* sides to get out of this situation smoothly. For Trker-Hon knew what the man was getting at.

“As soon as you made your approach to the *Rugr-Krehn*,” the Wise One said after exchanging a brief glance with the high commander, “you told us something astonishing. You said that you had what we were seeking. That was a lie at the time, wasn’t it?”

“Correct,” Rhodan admitted.

A clever man indeed. One who knew what was really important and could deny himself when the situation called for it.

“So, what *are* we seeking in this solar system, in your estimation?” asked Trker-Hon.

“The Ferrons can only offer one thing of interest to the Topsidans. A technology far beyond anything either race is otherwise capable of. For both the Ferrons”—Rhodan glanced at the Thort—“and the Topsidans,”—his gaze wandered to Genkt-Tarm and finally to Trker-Hon—“the transmitters are a true technological wonder. The ability to travel great distances in an instant! Even the Arkonides, so technologically superior in every respect, can’t make anything approaching that.”

Almost, the Wise One thought. *You've almost got it, Rhodan.* This third version of the justification for the war and conquest of the Vega system was known only to the highest-ranking officers. Aside from the despot himself and Genkt-Tarm as high commander, only a handful of Topsidans across the empire had any idea about it.

"Astonishing," Trker-Hon said, noticing with satisfaction that Genkt-Tarm was still keeping quiet and letting him lead the conversation. Everything was taking the right course. Because peace really was worth striving for. Enough Topsidans had died, and enough Ferrons on top of that. The death toll was unacceptably high. Even for a reward whose value went far beyond that of the transmitter technology, and about which even Genkt-Tarm knew nothing. Even Trker-Hon only suspected, but it was close to a certainty.

Still, even for that, enough intelligent beings had died.

Rhodan was relieved to see that Trker-Hon, at least, seemed receptive to his arguments. The Wise One was acting just as wisely as he had hoped.

"It's high time to put an end to all this death," Rhodan continued. "I know the leaders on both sides need something they can show their people: the proof that it's *good* to bring the war to a close. Here are my recommendations. I ask both sides—you, Genkt-Tarm, and also you, Thort—to please hear me out right to the end before stating your positions. Genkt-Tarm, the Ferrons will hand over several transmitters to you. The devices will belong to you the moment you agree to the peace treaty."

The high commander's claws were still scraping on the tabletop. Trker-Hon, meanwhile, looked at ease. Silence filled the air for a few moments, until Rhodan spoke up again.

"In return, the Ferrons will receive aid for reconstruction from the Topsidans—as a sign of reconciliation between the two peoples. In addition, the Topsidans will grant the Ferrons access to their general higher level of technology—a process that's already begun, as more and more technology has been being looted in the past few

days. The Fantan, who are currently making themselves at home in this system, will help with reconstruction as a third party and will be compensated by being allowed to keep whatever they find among the war's debris. Only for a period of one Earth month, however. After that, the Fantan must leave the system."

Rhodan leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest to show that he had finished presenting his suggestions. The result was as expected. Both the Thort and Genkt-Tarm protested vociferously and insisted that these conditions were impossible to fulfill.

Only one man remained silent: Trker-Hon. The Wise One met his gaze, and in that moment, Rhodan knew he had all but won.

Trker-Hon was pleased. He let Genkt-Tarm and the Thort argue. He himself simply listened to the discussion and kept quiet—just as Perry Rhodan did. The pale-skinned man really was clever. It was worth keeping an eye on him.

It took a little time, and a few occasional, carefully interjected words from Trker-Hon, before Genkt-Tarm backed down and agreed. In the end, he was getting what he wanted: a chance not to end up a failure, and on top of that, a princely reward in the form of the miraculous transmitter technology.

After that, the Thort quickly agreed as well.

Rhodan expressed his admiration for the adversaries' wisdom and was about to withdraw. He had already reached the door when Trker-Hon asked Genkt-Tarm, who would go down as the greatest field commander in history, for permission to leave the room too. This was magnanimously granted.

The Wise One intercepted Rhodan outside the meeting room. The guards let him pass. There was peace in the Vega system now.

"I have a request, Mr. Rhodan." This was an awkward moment. "Take me to your world. I would like to learn more about you and your people."

Rhodan seemed surprised. He clearly hadn't expected this. "I'm honored that you'd ask," he said at last. "Give me a little time to think. I can't decide that alone."

Trker-Hon agreed, knowing that he had nothing to fear since Rhodan had no ill intentions. It didn't surprise him when Rhodan summoned him shortly afterward. The small furry being was with him. This so-called "Mousebeaver" named Gucky had a strong telepathic gift. Who better to find out if a potential ally had an ulterior motive?

Mere seconds later, Gucky pulled at Rhodan's shirt. "It would be my honor," Trker-Hon was then told, "if you would accompany us, Wise One."

"Everything's changed," Rhodan said to Crest a few hours later. They were sitting in the *Tosoma*'s observatory and watching Genkt-Tarm and the Thort leave the ship; each was using an auxiliary craft from their own people's fleet.

Now, there was only one Topsidan left on board: the Wise One, Trker-Hon, who would travel with them to Earth on the *Tosoma*.

"This is the beginning of the future," Crest said thoughtfully. "As much for the Vega system as for your home. Do you think both sides will keep to the agreement?"

"I can only hope so. I did everything I could to ensure it."

"You are most admirable."

"But?"

"Even if they do find peace...would it be good for your human race, Rhodan? Vega is a close neighbor of your sun. This peace brings stability. That means you're breeding powerful competitors."

"I prefer the word 'friends,' Crest. Both the Topsidans and the Ferrons are dizzyingly superior to us, even after a war. We couldn't stand up to them in a conflict. So the best protection for my world is making sure it never comes to that."

Crest turned and gazed pensively into the depths of space. “That may well be. But you didn’t get anything out of it for your own people. As mediator, it would have been your right.”

“I consciously avoided that,” Rhodan clarified. “It has to be that way for us to look like honest peacemakers. But don’t think I’m naive. I had a chance to briefly chat with Allan Mercant before the negotiations. He told me what happened on Earth during my absence. We already possess one of these transmitters, in the undersea dome by the Azores.”

Crest opened his mouth but didn’t say anything. The two men sat next to each other in quiet satisfaction until Pounder contacted them from the bridge a few minutes later and said the *Tosoma* was ready to launch.

“Great!” Rhodan replied. “Then let’s head home, Pounder!”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

The commander cut the connection, and the *Tosoma* shook slightly as the impulse drives came online. A boyish grin crept across Rhodan’s previously contemplative face.

“What is it?” Crest asked, confused. “Why are you smiling, Rhodan?”

“Because…” Rhodan paused as he tried to put his thoughts into words. “Do you know something, Crest? Since you and I met on the Moon, I’ve experienced all kinds of things that have pushed the limits of my imagination. But that I’d give orders to Lesly Pounder one day…*that* I could never have imagined!”

Epilogue

No More Flames

Ivan Goratschin was sitting on scorched earth, but he felt at peace. Ishy was leaning against him. They had returned to the hill in the Gobi that had almost spelled their doom.

Together, they looked out at Terrania, now a free, untroubled city again, and gazed into the sky as darkness fell over the desert and the stars sparkled in the infinite distance.

Ishy took his hand.

It was good.